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JANUARY 1994

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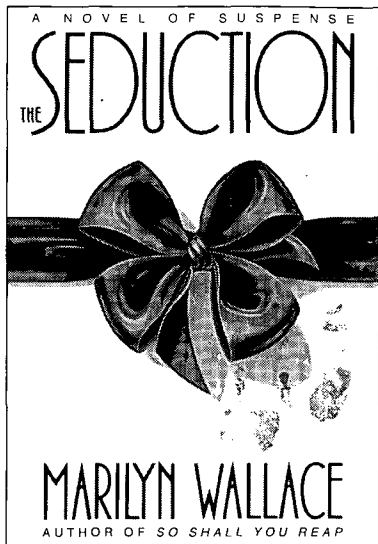
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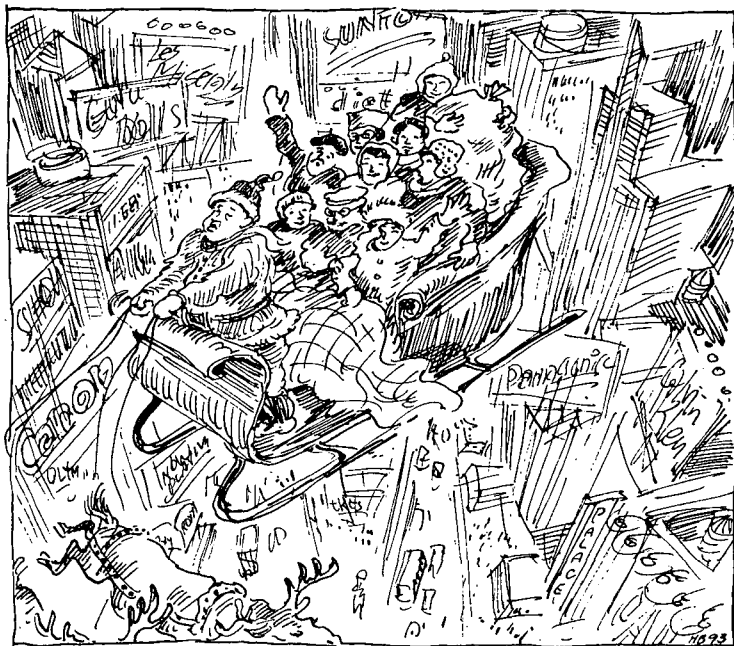
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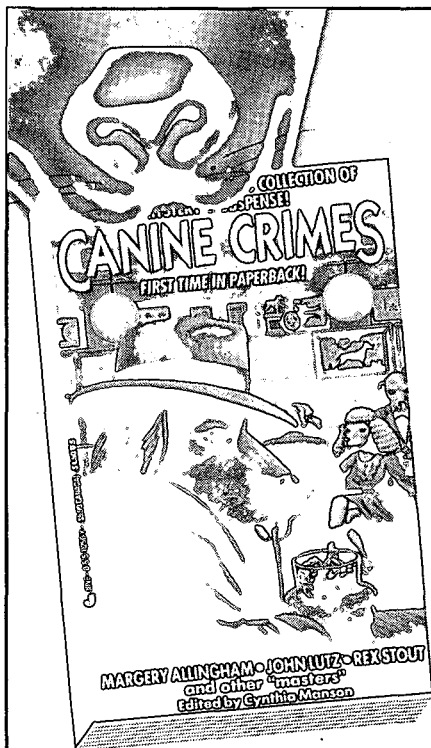
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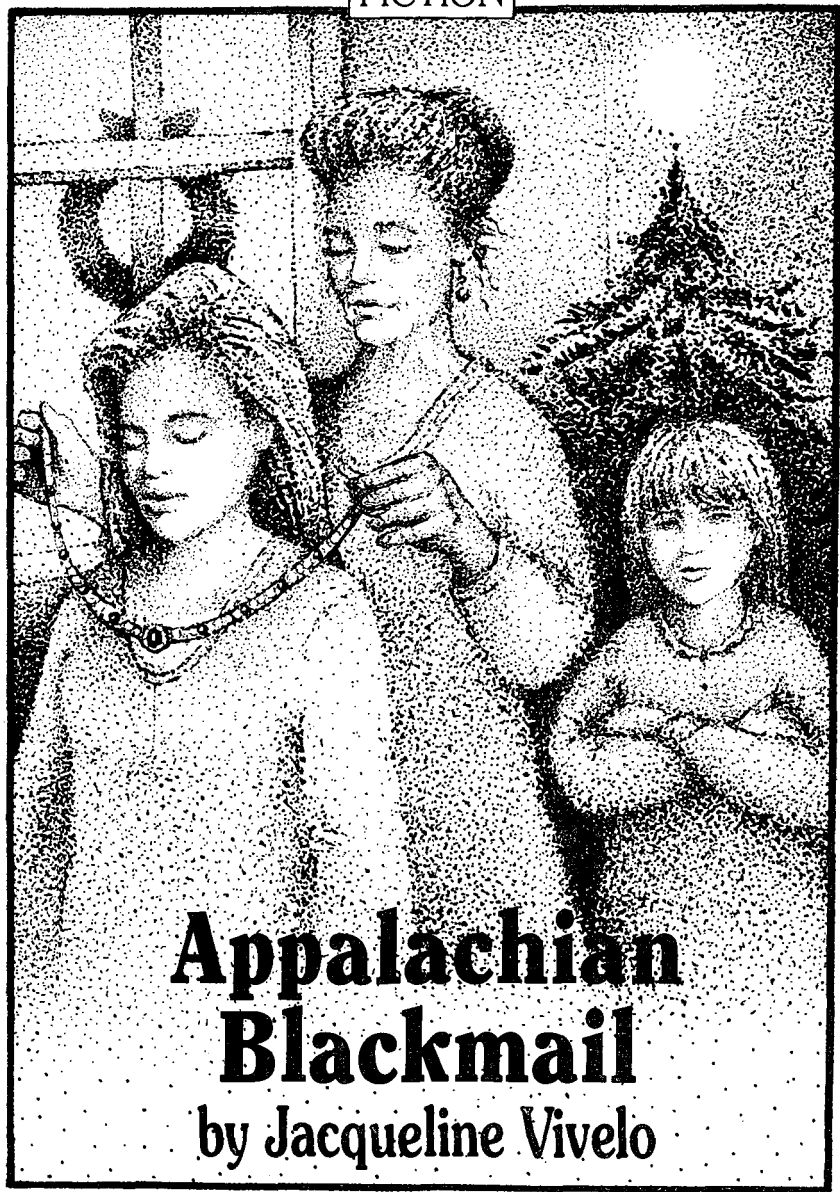
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FICTION



Appalachian Blackmail

by Jacqueline Vivelò

Illustration by Mark Penta

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My great-aunt Molly Hardison was a wealthy woman. By the standards of the coal mining town that was home to my family, she was fabulously rich. We didn't have any particular claim on her; she had nearer relatives. Still, she never forgot us children—and there were eight of us—at Christmastime. Once in every two or three years, she would come and spend the holiday with us.

Mama said Christmas with us was more like Aunt Molly's own childhood holidays than Christmas at her grand house or with her sons and their snooty wives.

We were poor all the time, and some years we were poorer than others. Nevertheless, at Christmas our house would be filled with evergreen boughs, pine cones, and red ribbons. Mama would keep hot cider simmering on the back of the woodstove so the house always smelled of cinnamon and cloves. No matter how bad things were, Papa could take his hunting dog, first Ol' Elsie and then later her son Ol' Ben, and bring in game. He brought home quail by the dozens, deer, wild turkeys.

Sometimes he'd be the only person we knew who had found a turkey, but he'd always get ours for the holiday. I think he was smart in the ways of turkeys. I was his tomboy and counted myself in on his discussions about hunting with my brothers. Papa would follow a goodsized turkey gobbler for weeks, learning its ways and finding its roosts. Turkeys like to move around, which is why they fool so many hunters, and they almost always have more than one roost.

I listened to all my father could tell us about hunting and would have gone with him when he began to take Joe and Cliff, but Mama put her foot down. I had to content myself with taking care of the hunting dog.

"Maybe someday, Betsy," Papa consoled me. "You'd make a fine hunter."

In any case, our house looked and smelled good at Christmas. It was filled with all the food a resourceful country family could provide. In our neck of the woods that was better than most city families, poor or rich, could do.

So, fairly regularly Aunt Molly would come and spend Christmas in our bustling, over-crowded house. Whether she was there or not, she always sent presents. Her sister, our own grandmother, was dead, which made her something of a stand-in. But we children

understood that presents for Christmas and our birthdays would be all we could expect from Aunt Molly, except, of course, for my sister Molly.

I don't think any scheming was involved on my mother's part. I think she just liked the name Molly. She named her first daughter for her mother and her second daughter for her aunt. It didn't hurt that both Mollys happened to be green-eyed redheads. Our Molly was the only redhead among the eight of us and the only one with green eyes. We understood, all of us from oldest to youngest, that our Molly was special to Aunt Molly.

Aunt Molly made it clear that something more than seasonal presents would come Molly's way. I was five the Christmas that Aunt Molly first brought her ruby and diamond necklace with her. Molly was twelve that year when our great-aunt put that magnificent necklace on her for the first time.

"It isn't yours yet, but it will be. I'm not having it go to either of my daughters-in-law. It'll be yours."

We were all in awe of those old stones that glowed with fire. Even the boys took a look, rolled their eyes, and murmured, "Wowee."

"When?" my sister Amanda, oldest of all and most practical, asked.

Aunt Molly fairly cackled.

"When? Well, you see, she'll get to keep it when she marries. Marriage," Great-aunt Molly said, "is the only choice open to a girl. It's the only way to live."

From then on, every Christmas that Aunt Molly spent with us included another look at the necklace and another review of what Molly had to do to get it.

When my sister Amanda was nineteen, she married Dr. Harvey Brittanman, a young G.P. who had just taken up practice in our area. Great-aunt Molly gave them a full set of fine dishes, a hundred and two pieces.

Everybody agreed that none of the rest of us girls was likely to do any better than Amanda had. After all, a doctor!

Sister Molly was seventeen that year. I always thought she was the best-looking of all of us, though later on my little sister Cindy turned out to be a beauty, too. Molly had creamy fair skin without freckles and deep dark red hair. She was slim and tall and wore her hair long. She liked nothing in the world better than reading and carried a book with her everywhere. She would sit on a damp

hillside and read until someone, usually me, went and told her to come home.

She had lots of admirers in high school, but two were the frontrunners. Malcolm Bodey was a football player, and Jerry Ratagan edited the school newspaper. Malcolm was planning to go into the mines like the rest of his family. Jerry was going on to the state university.

"You wait for the older men," Aunt Molly told sister Molly when she came for Amanda's wedding. "These boys are fine, but someone better will come along."

That wedding started me thinking. I was ten at the time. I thought about losing Amanda. I thought about marrying in general. I thought about me. I tried to picture me marrying one of the boys I knew, and it was an awful thought. I decided to try again to persuade Mama to let Papa teach me to hunt. I figured what I'd really like was to be a woodsman and live alone in a cabin in the woods. In our house I never had any time or any place alone.

Then I thought about Molly, Molly and the ruby and diamond necklace. For the first time I saw that the necklace hadn't been anything but trouble. For one thing, it had turned my sister Amanda bitter. Here she was, the oldest and the first married, but she wasn't getting the necklace. Aunt Molly had given her Royal Doulton china worth a king's ransom, but it didn't take away the sting. Amanda bore the brunt of the sense of rejection, but I suddenly saw that it was there for all of us, boys as well as girls.

A year later Molly graduated from high school and went to work at Lacy's drugstore. She didn't talk to any of us about what she wanted, but it was easy to see she was unhappy. Malcolm was determined to marry her, and it seemed to me she was weakening.

I felt like there was something about Molly I was missing, so out on the hillside one day I just asked her outright, "How do you really feel about that necklace Aunt Molly's going to give you when you get married?"

Well, she told me. I guess nobody had ever asked her that question before. She spilled out her feelings, her hopes, her wishes—everything in one long outburst. "Didn't you know?" she asked. "Didn't you guess? You're the one who's always watching everybody. I thought you didn't miss a thing—not that I expected anybody else to guess. But I thought you would."

I felt pretty stupid. Once she told me, it seemed obvious.

That next Christmas was one that Aunt Molly spent with us. She showed up two days before Christmas, in time to put her presents under the tree and to help with some of the cooking. Her coming brought back all the things I'd been thinking about when Amanda was married. When you're eleven-going-on-twelve, you're plagued by weighty thoughts.

My brother Cliff was my confidant in the family, but he'd picked that moment to have a chest cold or flu of some sort. He had been moved into the little room at the head of the stairs that was used as a sickroom whenever Mama suspected one of us had something contagious. We were only supposed to pass notes to each other, sending them in on the food trays.

I stood my serious thoughts all on my own for as long as I could, then went and knocked on the sickroom door.

"Who is it?" If a toad had a voice, it might sound all croupy like Cliff's that day.

"It's Betsy. I'm coming in."

I went to the far end of the bed and sat by Cliff's feet. He didn't say you shouldn't be here. He just said, "I can't talk so good."

"Well, you can listen." And I told him all the things I had thought about marriage, about the necklace, and about Molly. While I was talking, some things that had never entered my mind before seemed clear. Cliff croaked that since he wasn't the marrying type and I wasn't either, maybe we could both be hunters.

I felt a lot better after that. I wasn't weird after all. I slipped out of his room before Mama showed up with his lunch.

After supper that night we all gathered in the parlor. Cliff, his chest wrapped with flannel cloths that smelled of camphor, was bundled into a chair by the fireplace, Ol' Ben asleep at his feet. Even Amanda was with us. Her husband Harvey was there, too, but the two youngest children didn't know that because Harvey was dressed as Santa Claus and carried a big bag of toys.

He distributed presents, and we all opened them. There would be more in the morning under the tree, but we liked to spread Christmas out as far as we could.

Christmas Eve was always the time Aunt Molly asked Molly to wear the ruby and diamond necklace, "for a while, so I can see it on you, child." Aunt Molly laid it out on the table, and we all saw that it was still as impressive as ever. It seemed to catch the lights of the Christmas tree and the glow of the candles, not only reflecting but matching with light of its own.

Just as Aunt Molly said, "Come here, my dear, and let me put this on you," Cliff had a fit of coughing. Everyone's attention turned from the necklace to Cliff.

Aunt Molly laid the necklace down and stood up to look over the back of Cliff's chair. One younger child climbed on each arm of the chair, Cindy on one side and Tommy on the other. Harvey, who was a doctor first and Santa second, tossed his sack to one side and clumped across the room in oversized shoes. Someone tramped on Ol' Ben's tail in an effort to get to Cliff, and I led the dog, drugged by food and the warmth of the fire, toward the door.

"He's all right. Move back, everyone," Papa said. "Don't open that door," he added to me. "I don't want a draft through here until I get another blanket."

I slapped Ol' Ben on the bottom and sent him off to his box in the kitchen.

The little ones scrambled back to their presents. Aunt Molly, with a hand pressed to her bosom, turned back to the table. Mama picked up a bottle of cough medicine and then almost dropped it as Aunt Molly screamed.

"Who picked up the necklace? Molly, do you have it already?"

Looks of bewilderment met her questions. "Don't go out!" she commanded Santa Claus, who was trying to slip out the door with his empty sack to change back into his identity as Dr. Brittman. "Don't anyone move out of this room until I find the necklace."

"You can't suspect Santa Claus!" my brother James shouted, which was a cue for a good bit of silly chatter that had a bad effect on Aunt Molly's temper. She was much more thorough and more demanding in her search than she might have been otherwise.

Mama and Papa kept trying to make light of it. Of course the necklace was there. It had to be. None of us would take it. Aunt Molly said she would have granted that an hour earlier but the fact was someone *had*.

Our Santa Claus suggested we quarter the room and search it inch by inch with Aunt Molly supervising each stage of the search until the necklace turned up. That search was classic, something to pass into legend within our family. First, there were twelve people in the room, counting Aunt Molly herself, and someone insisted she should not be exempt from being searched. Santa and his sack were checked. Even Cliff agreed to be searched, his chair, his blankets, his clothes, his flannel wraps, every inch of the space around him.

Every branch of the tree was examined, every present inspected for signs of tampering. Two of them had to be opened and then repackaged because young hands had been scrabbling at them. But neither one contained the necklace. Chairs were overturned. The hanging light fixture was checked. It became a game to suggest new possibilities.

Maybe because he had been caught trying to get out the door, Harvey went to extremes to see that he and his props were cleared of suspicion. He also made sure every suggestion, no matter how unreasonable, was followed up. The windows were tested, even though everyone knew no one had opened a door or window. An icy wind was blowing, and it was snowing outside. Opening up just long enough to toss something out would have let in a blast the rest would have noticed, not to mention that the necklace would have been lost in the snow.

Aunt Molly had never seemed the least bit pitiful to anyone before that night. Now she looked like a broken woman. Her face was blotchy, and her shoulders sagged. I felt truly sorry for her. Like everyone else that night, I wanted to find her necklace and restore it to her, but it just wasn't possible.

Mama put her arm around her and told her she'd walk her up to her room. At the door, Aunt Molly turned and, looking at Molly, said, "I'm sorry, dear."

"We'll find it," Mama told Aunt Molly. "We'll still find it."

Papa, Amanda, and Dr. Brittaman were all shaking their heads behind Mama and Aunt Molly's backs. I knew what they were thinking. That necklace had just plain vanished, and it didn't seem likely it could ever be found. If it wasn't in that room, well, it just wasn't anywhere.

Papa carried Cliff back to his bed. The rest of us also began to get ready to sleep. Somehow no one knew quite what to say to Molly.

We shuffled through nighttime rituals in uneasy silence. This was no way to go to bed on Christmas Eve. Aunt Molly was hurt, and to all appearances, we had a thief in our family. A dull misery settled around my heart.

You wouldn't think a holiday could recover from a disaster like that, but the next day was one of the best Christmases of our lives. Strangely enough, it was all due to Aunt Molly, too. Several times during breakfast I saw her fingering a small piece of folded paper. She opened her presents with the rest of us and sounded sincerely

grateful for her box of handkerchiefs, bottle of toilet water, book of poetry, and the handmade gifts from the younger children. If she was grieving, she was doing it bravely. It seemed to me she just looked thoughtful.

In the middle of the afternoon when the younger children were playing and Amanda and Harvey had gone home, Aunt Molly said she had something to say. She gathered Mama and Papa and Molly around the table. I hung around to hear what was going on.

"I've been doing some thinking since last night," she told them. "No, don't interrupt," she cautioned as my mother began to speak. "I think I wanted to arrange for my namesake to have my life all over again, a thing that's not possible, not even reasonable." She stopped and sighed.

"It's all right about the necklace. I mean, it isn't all right that you lost it," Molly told her, "but it's all right that it isn't coming to me."

Aunt Molly ignored her and continued, "I'd like to see this young woman go on with her studies. Toward that end, I want to pay her way to college." At a sign of protest from my father, Aunt Molly said dryly, "Believe me, four years' tuition will be less than the value of that necklace. You will not, of course, get the necklace," she added to Molly.

"Thank you," said Molly, her eyes wet and shining.

Molly walked on air for the rest of the day. Aunt Molly beamed. My parents kept exchanging smiles. The rest of us were infected by their joy, so it felt like Christmas morning all day and half the night.

I worked it out the other day that Aunt Molly on that Christmas was about the age I am now. I, of course, am not old at all, though she seemed old to me then. She just recently died, having lived into her nineties. Her large estate was divided among her children and grandchildren, but her will made provision for a sealed manila envelope to be delivered to me.

When I opened the envelope, I found a correctly folded letter on thick creamy stationery together with a yellowed slip of paper folded into a square. I opened the slip of paper first and read the message:

You can have you miserable neclace back if you promise Molly don't haf to git married. She don't want a husban. She wants to go to collige.

I wouldn't have believed the spelling could have been that bad. I unfolded the accompanying letter and read:

Dear Betsy,

I don't know how many years will pass before you get this back, but I want to return your note to you.

For days I was baffled by the disappearing stunt you pulled. No one had left the room, yet the necklace wasn't in the room, I told myself. Continuing to puzzle over the problem, I repeated that paradox endlessly. Finally I varied it a bit and said, "Not one creature went out of the room." I stopped as I reached that point because I realized a "creature" had left—that smelly old hound. Then I knew my ruby and diamond necklace must have gone out of the room with the dog. He was wearing it there in his box by the kitchen stove all the time we were searching, wasn't he? Of course, I also remembered that you were the one who sent the dog out of the room while Cliff kept the rest of us distracted. What a determined child you must have been to hold out against all that adult energy!

You always were a clever child, Betsy.

Aunt Molly'd gone home that year with her necklace. Late on Christmas afternoon, it showed up without explanation on her bed. She made sure everyone saw it one last time, then after that holiday never mentioned it again.

When the new semester began a few weeks after Christmas, my sister Molly started college.

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Edited by Cynthia Manson

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FICTION

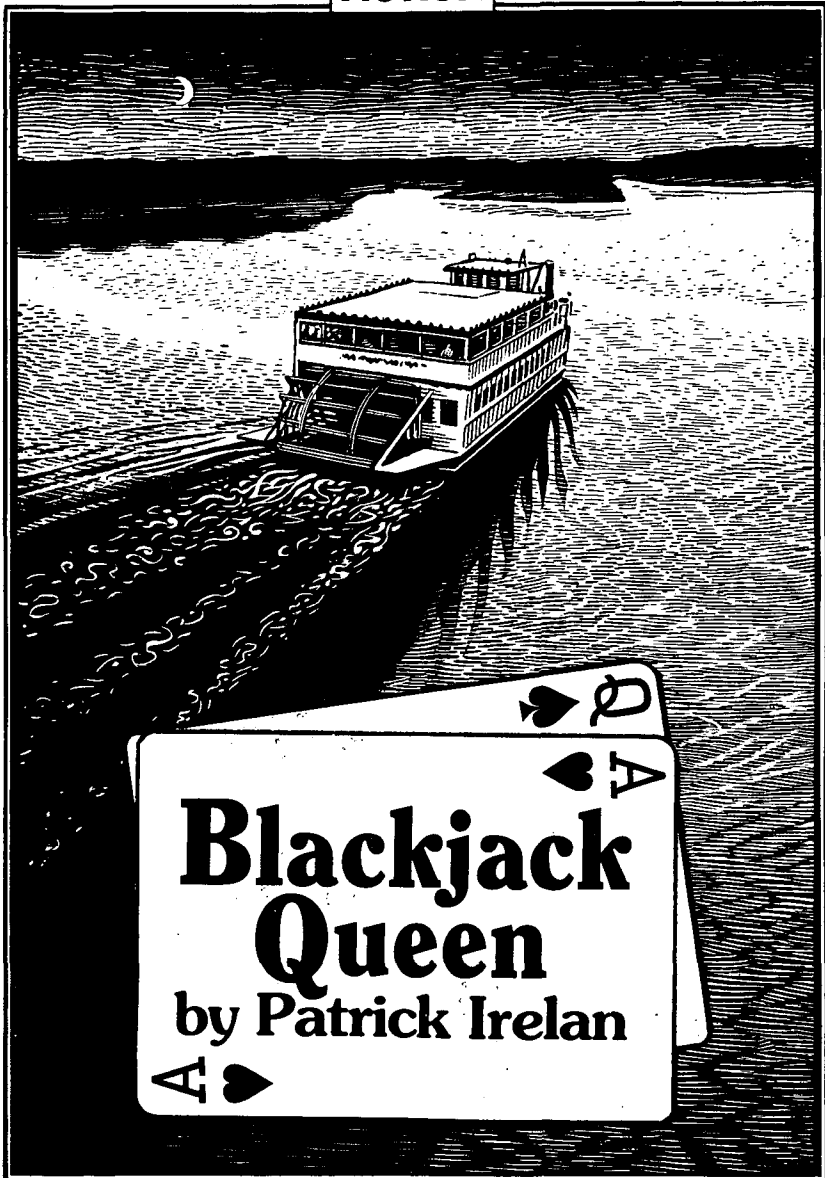


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I parked in the driveway, ignored the brick sidewalk, and walked across the grass to the big Tudor-style house. In my Sears jacket and my J. C. Penney tie, I was neither as tough as Sam Spade nor as well dressed as Phil Marlowe, but I was the best Davenport, Iowa, could offer.

A black maid opened the door and led me into a mahogany-paneled study with a view of the back yard. Wilkins stood up to shake hands, and the maid departed, the door closing noiselessly behind her.

"Thanks for coming out," Wilkins said, motioning toward a leather chair. He was six feet tall, twenty pounds overweight, and partially bald. He sat down facing me across a mahogany coffee table, but he didn't offer me any coffee. Probably couldn't afford it. "What I have to say must be kept strictly private."

"Then you called the right number," I said. "I'm a private investigator."

He ignored this witticism. "It involves my son," he said. He spoke so quietly that I had to lean forward to hear him. I wished he would talk louder, but I suppose you don't become the president of a bank by shouting like an auctioneer. "I think he's addicted to gambling. I've tried to speak to him

about it, but he's twenty-two years old and you know how boys that age are."

I didn't know a thimbleful of peanut butter about boys that age, but I concealed my ignorance. "Does he win or lose?" I said. I already knew the answer.

"He loses."

"Losers tend to run out of money. Where does he get more?"

"He used to get it from me, but when I found out where it was going, I cut him off. He has a small income left to him by his grandfather, but it doesn't cover his losses."

"How do you know?"

"A man has been calling, demanding payment. If Tim isn't here, he talks to me. He refuses to give his name, but he's very insistent and makes vague threats about what might happen if he doesn't get his money."

"Do you have any idea where your son does his gambling?"

"I don't know. That's just the problem. When he goes out, I never know where he is or what he's doing. That's why I called you. I don't want the publicity of a police investigation. I don't even want Tim to know I've hired you."

"I understand." Wealth has its disadvantages. Money and publicity often go together

whether you want them to or not. "I'll need a recent photograph of your son," I said. Wilkins went to his desk and returned with a color photo. The boy had blond hair, blue eyes, and straight teeth. I put the photograph into my pocket. Then I told Wilkins that I'd see what I could do and that I charged four hundred dollars a day, plus expenses. He didn't flinch.

We stood up and shook hands again, and the maid reappeared. She led me back to the front door and discharged me into the muggy July afternoon. I walked on the sidewalk this time. Now that I was on the payroll, I felt obliged to protect my employer's property. I climbed into my old blue Chevy and drove back downtown.

I found a place to park on Fourth Street and put some change in the meter. It's never hard to find a parking space in downtown Davenport. With its vacant lots and abandoned buildings, it looks about like Dresden in 1945.

My office is located in a three story brick building on the northeast corner of Fourth and Brady. At an earlier point in history, someone attempted to liven up the building by painting it pink. The attempt failed.

I have a one-room office on the second floor, in the corner overlooking the intersection. A Chinese restaurant occupies the space directly below me. The rest of the building is empty. Five years ago a developer put up a sign threatening to renovate the whole place, but that's as far as he got. No one accepted his invitation to "reserve space at this fashionable address." The sign's still there, and so am I. Both of us are showing signs of wear.

I climbed the stairs, unlocked my office, and turned on the air conditioner. I permit myself that luxury whenever I have a client. At ninety-eight degrees it's a good motivator.

My office contains a file cabinet, a coat rack, three chairs, a wooden desk, a radio, and a small refrigerator. One window overlooks Fourth Street, the other overlooks Brady. A black and white photograph hangs on one of the walls. It shows a gravel road passing through Iowa's rolling hills.

I took off my jacket, sat down, looked up a number, and dialed the phone. "*Davenport Belle*," said a female voice.

"Let me talk to Joey," I said.

"May I tell him who's calling?"

"No, tell him to pick up the phone." There was a brief pause.

"That you, Scofield?" said a man's voice.

"You guessed it. Joey?"

"Who else could it be?" he said. "Bogart's been dead for years."

"That's a good comparison," I said.

"I knew you'd think so. What can I do for you?"

"Does Tim Wilkins ever waste his money on your boat?"

"Not any more, thank God. The kid was a real pain in the ass."

"How so?"

"Whenever he lost his two hundred dollar limit, and he almost always did, he'd raise a big stink about wanting a chance to win it back. It didn't do any good to tell him the law said he had to stop. He wanted to keep on playing. Finally he quit coming here."

"Why's that?"

"I don't know. Probably started going across the river to the boat in Rock Island, just like a lot of others. They don't have loss limits in Illinois, you know."

"I know."

"This goddamned low-stakes rule is going to ruin us. We can't compete. People like to bet as much as they want, and they let them do it over there. How can we compete with that?"

"Good question. If I think of an answer, I'll call you back."

"Thanks, Scofield. You're a big help."

"My pleasure."

I flipped through the phone book, found a number in Rock Island, and dialed. "*Blackjack Queen*," a woman's voice said. She sounded beautiful. Women always sound beautiful on the phone. It's a biological trick to propagate the race. Read Darwin if you don't believe me. It's all there in *The Origin of Species*.

"Let me speak to the manager," I said. I didn't know his or her name. I knew the old manager's name, but he'd been promoted to Peoria. It's always nice to have something to look forward to. Maybe the new guy would get promoted to East St. Louis.

"Who's calling, please?"

"Eliot Ness."

"Mr. Flynn has gone for the afternoon, Mr. Ness, but he'll be on the boat for tonight's dinner cruise if you'd like to see him then."

"Thanks. I'll do that." I hung up and turned up the air conditioner.

In my line of work, I sometimes have to deal with dangerous people. I know how to handle myself in most situations, but I'm not very big, I never

perfected my left jab, and the only black belt I own is the one that holds up my pants. So when I'm working, I always carry my Browning automatic, and I wear a jacket to conceal it. A jacket gets a little warm in the summer, but it's better than a body cast.

At five thirty, I put on my jacket and turned off the air conditioner. I went down to the car, drove to the Centennial Bridge, and crossed the Mississippi to Rock Island. The haze was thick over the river. A freight train was passing under the approach to the bridge on the Illinois side.

I parked in a lot and walked over to the *Blackjack Queen* riverboat. By six o'clock, the boat had pulled away from the dock with me on board, and I was ordering dinner at Wilkins' expense. I made the best I could of roasted catfish and a bottle of Chardonnay. A detective's life is full of privation.

I concluded the meal with two cups of coffee. I tried to flirt with the waitress, but she wouldn't flirt back. I considered reducing her tip but decided that would be childish. Especially since Wilkins was paying for it. I walked down to the casino on the lower deck and checked out the decor. There were plenty of bright lights, mostly red, orange, green, and

yellow. The walls, pillars, and ceiling featured scarlet and purple. I went over to the bar.

One of the bartenders was Frankie Campolo, a guy I'd gone to Davenport Central with twenty-five years before. "What'll you have, Mike?" he said.

"Nothing just now, Frankie," I said. "Where can I find the manager?"

"See the guy in the blue suit?" he said, pointing at a big man near a blackjack table. "That's himself, Thomas Flynn."

I went over to where Flynn was overseeing his domain. He had blond hair, green eyes, and bad breath. I kept my distance. "Mr. Flynn?" I said. I like snappy beginnings.

"Yes, sir," he said. "What can I do for you?" He smiled a haberdasher's smile. He stood about six eight.

"I'm Michael Scofield," I said, producing a laminated copy of my detective's license. The smile disappeared from Flynn's face. "I'm looking for Timothy Wilkins."

"Come with me," he said. He led the way into an office that overlooked the prow of the boat. He closed the door but remained standing. I remained standing, too. I wanted him to be able to hear me way up there. "A private eye from

Iowa, huh? What does a private cop do in a hick state like that?"

"Not much. Look for stolen hay bales, find out who tracked cow dung on the rug. Right now I'm looking for Timothy Wilkins. You wouldn't happen to know him, would you?"

"Maybe I do, and maybe I don't. Why should I tell you?"

"Because his daddy is one of the richest men around, and because I have a friend at the *Quad City Times* who would love to do a story about young Tim and the evils of gambling." I was bluffing, but I tried not to show it. I stared at him and attempted to sneer.

"And if I tell you what you want?"

"I'll keep it under my hat." I wasn't wearing a hat, but I thought he'd understand. He was a bright boy, this Flynn. He'd go far.

"Okay, what do you want to know about Tim Wilkins?"

"His father wants to find out about his gambling. He thinks the boy's losing too much money and wants it to stop."

"What someone loses is his own problem. Our games are honest. If he can't afford to lose, he shouldn't play."

"So he comes here often?"

"He comes here sometimes, but he isn't here now. Somebody would've spotted him and told me."

"Then he must be a regular?" Sometimes you have to ask the same question twice.

"You could say that. When he has any money, he is."

"When's the last time he was here?"

"This afternoon."

"How'd he do?"

"He lost, just like he always does. Worst gambler I've ever seen. Then he pulled his usual stunt."

"What's that?"

"He asked for credit."

"Did he get it?"

"Of course not." He looked at me as if I'd just chopped a hole in the hull.

"Where *could* he get it?"

"I don't know, and I don't want to know. Now if you don't mind, I have work to do."

He didn't look as if he had work to do, but I let it pass. I went back into the casino and stood there with nowhere to go and nothing to do. I didn't think Wilkins would want me to play the slot machines with his money. Hiring me was a gamble anyway. I was about to head for the bar when a young woman with a curly blonde perm walked up to me.

"I heard you tell Flynn you were looking for Tim Wilkins," she said. She was a dealer from the nearby blackjack table where another dealer had just taken her place. She was wear-

ing black pants, a white shirt, a red vest, and a red bow tie. The name tag pinned to her vest said "Cindy." "Why are you looking for him?" she asked.

"He said he'd tell me where to find a good all-night game."

"He's already there. I can tell you where it is," she said, looking around cautiously. She turned back toward me and waited.

I could tell she wasn't waiting for the Second Coming, so I said, "How much?"

"Fifty bucks. Don't show everyone what you're doing."

It must be the Sears jacket. It makes everyone think I'm made of money. I gave her the fifty as inconspicuously as I could. I was sure the governor didn't notice. The woman gave me an address in Rock Island. "Don't tell anyone here about this," she said, then walked away without saying thank you.

I'd found what I came for, but I didn't feel like a swim, so I stayed on the boat for the rest of the cruise. I managed to keep away from the slot machines, but the bar was harder to ignore. In my business you have to keep up pretenses, so I kept them up with five bottles of Beck's Dark. In the process, I learned from Frankie Campolo

that the blackjack dealer's name was Cindy Reed. He didn't charge me for the information. At nine o'clock the *Blackjack Queen* slid up to the dock, and I slid down the ramp and into my car.

I drove to a local cafe and had two cups of coffee. No need to get to the party too soon. As Amy Vanderbilt said, "Being exactly on time or a little before the hour usually proves embarrassing." Thanks, Amy. I had another cup of coffee and looked at a newspaper. People were still killing each other.

At ten o'clock I found the address Cindy Reed had given me. The street out front was full of cop cars, both city and county. Amy had let me down. The party was over. I parked my car, got out the photo of Timothy Wilkins, and joined the crowd of festive onlookers across the street from the house. It was a small frame building with a small yard, not the kind of place where you'd expect to find James Wilkins' son and heir.

Cops began bringing men out and shoving them into the cars—black men, white men, Latinos—a real melting pot. But no Timothy Wilkins. I'd have to see Cindy Reed about a refund. The last man out was Harry Blake, industrious young gambling promoter, ac-

accompanied by Detective Lieutenant Brendan Doyle.

I waited until Doyle had Blake safely in the back of one of the patrol cars, then I walked over. Doyle could barely conceal his delight at the success of the raid, but when he saw me, concealment got easier. "What are you doing here?" he said.

"Just doing a bit of sleuthing," I said.

"Then why don't you sleuth your way back across the river. I have enough trouble already."

I ignored his suggestion. "Is that all of them?"

"What's it look like?" Doyle is tall and knobby, with a face that would scare Vito Corleone into confessing.

"Who tipped you?"

"Jimmy the Greek. Now if you'll excuse me."

I stepped back, and Doyle walked away. I went across the street and questioned some of the spectators. No one seemed to know anything about Blake's operation, except that it had created a parking problem on that block. After thirty minutes of this, I accepted Doyle's invitation to sleuth back across the river.

The next morning the *Quad City Times* carried a lively story about the raid on Blake's

gambling joint. It mentioned neither Timothy Wilkins nor the parking problem. The police had confiscated cards, dice, calculators, weapons, and ten thousand dollars in cash. A picture of Blake appeared with the article. I clipped it out and put it into my files. Then I turned on the radio to catch the latest. Blake was already out on bail.

After lunch I looked up Cindy Reed's address and drove back across the Mississippi to Rock Island. The temperature wasn't as hot today. A breeze was driving whitecaps toward the Illinois shore. Upriver, a towboat was pushing a string of barges through the lock at Dam 15 at the foot of Arsenal Island.

Cindy Reed lived on the first floor of an old apartment building two blocks from the *Blackjack Queen's* berth. Her door was in the rear. I knocked. No one came. I knocked again. Still no one.

I tried the door and found it unlocked. I looked back over my shoulder for help. Dr. Watson wasn't there. Sherlock would have to do it himself.

I opened the door and walked into the living room. "Hello," I said. No one answered. I went into the bedroom. No one there. I walked back through the living room to the kitchen. Someone was lying on the floor be-

side the refrigerator. I dropped to one knee, felt for her pulse, and checked for signs of respiration. Cindy Reed had dealt her last hand.

She had on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. No shoes. Her skin was still warm to the touch. Her bottom lip was split and swollen, and her face was covered with bruises. A huge knot had formed on the right side of her head. I looked up at the refrigerator. The door had numerous dents in it, all about five feet off the floor.

I stood up and quickly searched the apartment. In the drawer of a nightstand beside the bed, I found a small plastic bag containing a white powdery substance. I looked at it. I tasted it. It was either cocaine or a mighty good imitation. Next to the bag was a piece of paper with a phone number. I picked up the phone and dialed. It rang twice before someone picked it up. A woman's voice said, "Wilkins residence."

I hung up without speaking. Two surprises in one afternoon were enough for me; I didn't want to invite any more. I folded the piece of paper and put it into my pocket. I put everything else back where I'd found it. Then I called the police.

The first squad car arrived in two minutes. Doyle arrived in ten. "This is twice in two days that I've found you in the wrong place," he said.

"Uh-huh," I said.

"What were you doing here?"

"Conducting an investigation."

"What kind of investigation?"

"A man's son is losing too much money at gambling. I wanted to interview this woman to see what she could tell me. She worked on the *Blackjack Queen*."

Doyle looked at me with something approaching contempt. "Who's the client?" he asked.

I smiled. "Sorry," I said.

"I ought to haul you in and make you sit in front of a bright light," he said, "but then I'd have to watch you smirk. So get out of here." I got out.

The next morning the newspapers were ablaze with the murder. Attractive young woman. Glamorous business. Distraught parents. The papers mentioned no connection between the murder and the gambling raid the night before. Either there was no connection or the police were keeping it quiet. I didn't think Doyle would want to talk about it, so I saved my dime.

The papers were more helpful when it came to Cindy's background. She'd grown up on a small farm near Columbus Junction, Iowa, fifty miles southwest of Davenport. She had been an only child, an average student in high school, and an above-average basketball player. Employment on the riverboat had allowed her to escape from the local meat-packing plant.

The papers didn't say anything about the bag of cocaine, but I didn't need to be reminded. It was time for the call my client wouldn't want me to make. I picked up the phone and dialed. "Wilkins residence," said a woman's voice. I didn't hang up this time.

"May I speak to Timothy Wilkins," I said.

"Just a moment, please." There was a pause.

Someone finally picked up the phone. "Hello," he said.

"Timothy Wilkins?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"This is Michael Scofield. I'm a private detective. I'm conducting an investigation for your father."

"Yeah," he said again. He wasn't much of a conversationalist.

"Your father's worried about you. He thinks you've become addicted to gambling."

"My father's a fool."

"That's funny. He didn't act like a fool. Maybe I missed something."

"Maybe you did."

"It seems that you've run up some gambling debts. I was wondering where you plan to get the money to pay them off."

"Why don't you mind your own business."

"You don't have a job. Your father has cut you off. Your income from your grandfather's estate is too small to support your habit. So where are you getting the money? I think I know where. I think you're dealing cocaine, and I thought I should warn you that that's a very risky business. It can get you into all kinds of trouble."

"You're just as crazy as my father. I don't owe anybody any money, and I don't sell drugs. So you might as well drop the whole thing."

"I can't do that, Tim. I couldn't do it even if I wanted to. One of your customers has been murdered. That changes the whole situation. It means I'll have to tell the police everything I know, and everything I know about you doesn't sound too good. You're in trouble, Tim. I can try to help you, but before I do, you'll have to be honest with me."

He hesitated. "You're bluffing," he said. "You're making this all up."

"I'm afraid I'm not. It wasn't all that hard to find out what I wanted to know. Lots of people know you, and I'm sorry to say that some of them don't like you. I hope that doesn't damage your self-esteem. Maybe you could join a support group."

"Go to hell." The line went dead. I guess he didn't like my suggestion. I'd give him time to think about things. You have to be patient in this business. I put the phone down and turned up the air conditioner.

By calling Tim Wilkins, I'd gone past what his father had authorized, but I always feel a compulsion to get to the bottom of things, especially when I find a dead body. Once I get started on a murder case, I can't stop.

I waited until after the funeral, then called Cindy Reed's parents. Her father didn't want to talk, but her mother did. She was trying to understand why she'd lost her only child. I told her how sorry I was. I told her how kind her daughter had been in helping me with an investigation I was working on. I said I was trying to help the police solve the murder. I didn't say anything about the cocaine or the illegal gambling operation in Rock Island.

"She was so happy when she got this job," her mother said. "It meant she wouldn't have to

work in that awful packing plant any more, or move to Chicago or St. Louis. There's nothing here for young people any more. No jobs. You barely survive on a farm. You can't even join the military. They have too many people already. We thought this would be good for her, give her a chance to do something different. We didn't know it would end like this."

"Did she have any friends here in the Quad Cities?" I asked.

"There was another girl. Her name was Erica Jensen. They shared an apartment for a while. Then Erica moved away. She was a nice girl, but she wanted more money. She was always trying to find a better job or think of a business she could get into."

"Any boyfriends?"

"Just one that I knew of. Nice looking young man. Cindy brought him out to the farm once to meet us. We all went to the Dairy Queen for milkshakes. He was polite, but kind of quiet. Didn't really say much about himself, where he lived or what he did. We only saw him that once, and Cindy never talked about him again."

"Do you remember his name?"

"Yes. It was Christian, Matt Christian."

Matt Christian. That name answered a book full of questions. "Matt Christian" was one of the many aliases Harry Blake had used thus far in his criminal career. I recognized it because I'd heard someone call him that at a bar in Galesburg, Illinois, one night a couple of years before. Blake must have had a different alias for every town in the Midwest.

I thanked Mrs. Reed and asked if I could drive out for a brief visit some afternoon. She said that would be fine. We said goodbye and hung up.

I sat there a few minutes. Then I loaded my automatic and filled an extra clip. I put the gun back into its holster and strapped it on. I put on my jacket and slipped the extra clip into my pocket.

It wasn't always easy to find someone in the Quad Cities, especially someone like Harry Blake who didn't sit at home all day waiting for you to drop by for cocoa and cookies. There are actually several cities in what we still call the Quad Cities. They include Davenport and Bettendorf on the Iowa side of the Mississippi; Rock Island, Moline, and East Moline on the Illinois side; and a number of smaller towns on either side. Altogether they have a population

of over three hundred thousand people.

I knew the habits of the Harry Blakes of the world, so I didn't waste time looking for him in a library. Instead, I went to the Harrison Street Pool Hall in Davenport, to Gino's Bar in Moline, and to a number of similar places.

I eventually found him shooting pool at the Sunshine Tap in Rock Island. His opponent was Eddie Spoon, who'd recently done eighteen months at Vandalia for auto theft. Spoon also dabbled in pimping and mail fraud. A real Renaissance man.

Blake and Spoon were the only customers at the moment. Blake was about five ten, the same height as me. He had a muscular build. Spoon was tall, with a large frame. Both had brown hair and brown eyes. Neither had ever been elected Miss Congeniality.

"Hello, boys," I said.

"Hello, hotshot," Blake said. He didn't like me. Spoon didn't say anything. He just sneered and missed an easy shot at the five ball in the side pocket.

"Tough luck," I said.

"Stick it in a light socket," Spoon said. He didn't like me either.

"I need to talk to you, Harry," I said.

"No, you don't." Blake had held a grudge against me ever

since I caught him shoplifting at a client's store when he was fourteen. His opinion of me didn't improve when I caught him pawning another client's computer a year later. Somehow, we just didn't hit it off. I suppose he now sensed a threat to his gambling empire. He was a very competitive guy.

"I need to talk to you about Cindy Reed."

"Never heard of her." He sank the ten ball in the corner pocket.

"That's odd," I said. "She'd heard of you. Even told me where I could find you for a game of chance. This was before someone murdered her, of course."

"Of course." He banked the five ball in the side pocket, after which he drilled the nine ball in the corner. Then he stopped to chalk his cue tip while Spoon went to buy some beers.

"Cindy was a real helpful girl," I went on. "After she told me where to find you, it occurred to me that she might have told others. She worked in a riverboat casino, after all. What better place to drum up suckers for you? You probably gave her a modest cut, and she always needed the money. Besides that, she charged her customers for the information she gave them." Blake stopped

chalking the tip for just a second, the chalk suspended over the cue like the dot over the letter *i*.

"Come on, Harry," I said. "You must have known. Cindy wouldn't miss a trick like that, would she? She charged me fifty dollars. Unfortunately, the game ended before I got there. I was looking for another friend of mine, Tim Wilkins."

Blake put the chalk on the rim of the table. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I don't know anyone named Cindy Reed or Tim Wilkins."

"I felt pretty bad when the police broke up your party before I got there. You must've felt bad, too. How'd they find you, Harry? You don't suppose Cindy told them, do you? I'll bet they'd pay plenty for that kind of information. Is that why you killed her, because she told the police where your gambling joint was? That wasn't too smart, Harry. I think Lieutenant Doyle will eventually see the connection. He may be looking for you right now."

"Let him look. I didn't have anything to do with it."

"Oh yeah? Where were you when Cindy Reed was murdered?"

"In church. Where were you?"

"Nowhere useful. If I'd had my brain in gear, I would've known what was going to happen and done something to stop it. Now I'll regret for the rest of my life that I wasn't there to smash your head against the refrigerator door. Maybe I'll still get the chance someday."

"Maybe you'll get a bullet in the head someday."

"Every once in a while, guys like you crawl out of the toilet and drag someone back in with them, someone like Cindy Reed. But I don't understand how even you could've killed her the way you did. She was your girlfriend, for chrissake, and you murdered her. How can you live with yourself, Harry? Your own girlfriend."

Spoon came back with two beers. He didn't offer one to me. "You're crazy, Scofield," Blake said. "She wasn't my girlfriend, and I didn't kill her." He called the twelve ball, banked it off the back rail, and watched it roll the length of the table into the corner pocket to his right.

The next morning, I called Cindy's parents. Then I drove out to their farm near Columbus Junction, past the melon fields around Muscatine and west on Highway 92. The temperature had dropped a little overnight, and the heat was al-

most bearable. I pulled into the driveway, and a big collie came bounding out to bark at the fenders and attack the tires. I opened the door, and he gave me a saliva treatment.

The Reeds lived in a two story frame house that must have looked pretty nice in about 1880. Now it badly needed repairs. The shingles were worn and crudely patched. The eaves drooped. The entire house needed a coat or two of paint.

Mr. Reed met me at the door. He was heavy and bald. He didn't waste words. "I want the man who killed my daughter punished," he said.

"So do I," I said. I didn't tell him that if I'd had my marbles all in one pocket I could have prevented her murder to begin with.

Mrs. Reed came out of the kitchen. She was gray and looked more tired than anybody ever should. She took me around the house and showed me Cindy's graduation picture, her blue ribbons from the county fair, pictures of her playing basketball, newspaper articles about the team, the pincushion she'd made for her mother in fourth grade. Finally, she showed me Cindy's room. Mrs. Reed had kept it the way it was when Cindy left home, just so she'd feel wel-

come when she came back for a visit. Recently, she said, those visits had grown more infrequent.

I asked again about Cindy's life in the Quad Cities. "There's one thing I forgot," she said. "When Cindy first moved there, she worked on the *Davenport Belle*. After a few months she moved over to the boat in Rock Island. I think she got a little more pay there."

"Do you remember anything more about Matt Christian? Did they work together?"

"I don't think so."

"Did she ever mention where they met or what he did for a living?"

"No, she just said he was her friend. The day they came here she said they were just out for a drive and decided to drop in. He didn't say much about himself. The only thing we did while they were here was go to the Dairy Queen."

Finally I came to the main reason for my visit. "I want to show you a picture," I said to both of them as I took out the picture of Harry Blake from the *Quad City Times*. "Is this the man who called himself Matt Christian?"

They looked at it. "No," Mrs. Reed said, "that's not Matt Christian." She opened the drawer of a table and took out a cheap camera and some pic-

tures of her own. She selected one of the photographs and handed it to me. "This is Matt Christian," she said.

I stared at the picture, which showed a young man and a young woman standing in front of a Dairy Queen. The smiling woman was Cindy Reed. The embarrassed man beside her was Tim Wilkins.

If you want to be a successful detective, there's one rule you should never forget: don't jump to conclusions. I had seriously violated that rule in the matter of "Matt Christian." Upon first hearing that name from Mrs. Reed, I'd immediately linked it with Harry Blake. I made an assumption based on limited information, and now I felt like a dope. And if I had jumped to the wrong conclusion about "Matt Christian," what other false assumptions had I made about the case? I felt so boneheaded that I could barely stand to walk around in the same pair of pants with myself.

As it turned out, Mrs. Reed had already given Doyle a copy of the same picture. I wondered what else he knew that he wasn't telling. Maybe nothing. Maybe a lot. Did he know the identity of the man in the picture? Perhaps. Did he suspect him of the murder? Probably. A

detective learns to suspect everyone and assume nothing. I was still learning.

I thought about all this as I drove back to Davenport. What had been the real relationship between Tim Wilkins and Cindy Reed? Drug dealer and customer? Lovers? Had he killed Cindy? If so, why? Why kill a good customer? Maybe she wasn't good any more. Had she started asking for something he couldn't deliver? So many questions. So few answers.

I parked on the street and climbed the stairs to my office. Still no new renters at this "fashionable address." I turned on the air conditioner, picked up the phone, and called my old friend Lieutenant Doyle. He didn't know he was my old friend. I still had to convince him.

"Lieutenant," I said, "I think we should be friends."

"Why?"

"So we can help each other. I'll help you. You'll help me."

"Sounds just swell, Scofield. What do you want?"

"I want to know who the man is in the picture with Cindy Reed in front of the Dairy Queen, the picture Mrs. Reed gave you."

"If she showed you the same picture, she must've told you the name."

"Matt Christian," I said.

"Yeah," he said.

"Is that his real name?"

"Maybe."

"Do you know who else uses that name?"

"Who?"

"Harry Blake." There was a distinct pause. "Isn't that interesting, lieutenant?"

"It's interesting enough, Scofield. What else?"

"Have you considered the possibility of a connection between the raid on Harry Blake's place and the murder of Cindy Reed?"

"It crossed my mind once or twice. Why?"

"Has it occurred to you that Blake might have killed her for informing on him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Two reasons."

"Which are?"

"The day she was killed, we had Blake under surveillance from the time he was released on bail."

"And the other reason?"

"The informant was a man, not a woman."

"What man?" I knew how to work my way around to the good part.

"An anonymous man."

"Anonymous?"

"That's right, Scofield. Anything else?"

"I guess not. Thanks."

"Glad to be of help." He hung up.

I got up early the next morning, or what qualified as early for me, eight o'clock. It was time for another chat, this one in person. At a little after nine, I parked a block from the house, in a spot that gave me a good view of the driveway. I was wearing dark glasses to protect my bloodshot brown eyes. With my dark hair and expressionless mug, I probably looked like a movie hit man. I uncorked my thermos of coffee and got out my binoculars. Caffeine and visual aids. What could be better?

By eleven, my enthusiasm had evaporated. It was now hotter than hell, and it wasn't about to get any cooler. I would've started the engine and turned on the air conditioner, but it didn't work. I consoled myself with the thought that I wasn't blasting holes in the ozone layer.

At twelve o'clock, Patrolman Terry Barnes drove by in a Davenport squad car. He didn't even look at me. I could tell from the beatific look on his face that his air conditioner did work.

At one thirty a red sports car came down the driveway and turned left, with Timothy Wilkins at the wheel. I started the

engine, waited until he was two blocks ahead of me, and pulled into the street.

I had no trouble tailing him. He was in no apparent hurry. He crossed the river to Rock Island, drove to Douglas Park, and stopped along the street. I stopped a block behind.

Five minutes later, a young black kid emerged from a grove of trees and walked quickly to the red sports car. A transaction occurred. I assumed they weren't trading baseball cards.

Tim went on around the park, took Eleventh Street to Blackhawk Road, and drove across Rock Island to Moline. He stopped in front of a new house with a three-car garage. I pulled over to the curb and waited. He climbed out and carried a small paper bag up to the door. Probably full of grits and gravy. The man who answered the bell was Thomas Flynn, manager of the *Blackjack Queen*.

In less than a minute, Tim came back out of the house, got into his car, and drove away. I let him go half a block before I started after him. As I drove by Flynn's place, I saw that the garage was bigger than the house.

I followed Tim back to Davenport and out to an ugly shopping mall on the north edge of town. He pulled into the park-

ing lot of a doughnut shop, and I decided it was time to stop riding around in a sauna. I pulled in behind his car, blocking his escape. "Hello, Tim," I said as I jumped out. "I'm glad I ran into you."

"Who the hell are you?" he said. He really knew how to turn on the charm.

"The name's Michael Scofield. I talked to you on the phone the other day, but we lost our connection. I thought we could take up the conversation where we left off."

"I've got nothing to say to you."

"Why don't we sit in your car. Mine's a little warm." I started toward the passenger side of his car.

"Stay out of there," he said.

"What? You don't want to have a little chat?"

"Why should I?"

"Because if you don't, I'll have to have a little chat with Sergeant Schmidt at the Moline Police Department. He'll be interested in the delivery you just made to big Tom Flynn."

"You're bluffing again. You don't know what I gave him."

"Maybe I do. Maybe I don't. Get in the car or I'll call Schmidt right now." He got in.

The sports car was a little cramped by my standards. I was forty-one, too old for

bumper cars. But the air conditioner worked like a cold front in Saskatoon. I called the meeting to order. "Tim," I said, "you're up the sewer without a paddle. There's a cell at the penitentiary with your initials already on the towels. The police got your picture from Mrs. Reed, and they know who you are. They think you killed Cindy, and they may be right. They're still in the dark about your coke business, but I know it in intimate detail. If you don't tell me what I want to know, I'll give them every piece of evidence I have."

"What evidence? You can't prove Flynn gets his stuff from me."

"I can make a pretty good case for it. And I can make an even better case for the late Cindy Reed. I found your phone number on a piece of paper in her handwriting. It was in a drawer with a bag of Tim's best. I left the coke but took the number. That's called withholding evidence, and it could cost me my license. But I'm prepared to give it to Doyle if I have to in order to find out who killed Cindy."

"Where is this piece of paper?"

"In a place where you'll never find it, sonny boy." It was actually in my pocket, but I was

feeling confident. "Who killed Cindy Reed?"

"I don't know."

"Did you?"

"Of course not."

"Can you prove it?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I was with Flynn. Just ask him."

"Doing what?"

"Business."

"I'll bet. If you didn't kill her, who did?"

"I said I don't know."

"You must have some idea. You knew her pretty well, and you knew all the same punks she did. Who had a reason to kill her?"

"I don't know."

"Why'd you tell Cindy's parents your name was Matt Christian? That's one of Harry Blake's aliases."

"I thought they might know my father. His bank does a lot of farm loans. I didn't want it to get back to him that I was spending time with a blackjack dealer. Cindy understood that. It was just a joke to use Blake's alias. Cindy thought it was funny, too."

"Real funny. Who squealed on Blake?"

"I don't know."

"Think about it. You must have an idea."

"Maybe Cindy did it. Then he killed her to get even."

"The police say it was a man."

"Maybe she had a friend do it."

"Maybe. Maybe you did it."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. Cindy told me you were at Blake's. But when I got there, you were, as they say, conspicuous by your absence. Why weren't you there? Lots of other losers were. You don't have to answer. I know already. You weren't there because you were the one who called the police, weren't you? You thought you could get Blake off your back if you turned him in. So you did it, even though you knew he'd suspect Cindy Reed, his chief recruiter and your faithful customer. You did it even though you knew he might kill her." I didn't mention that the police had had Blake under surveillance the day Cindy was killed. "Tell me what you know right now or I'll have every drug agent in the state searching your father's house before sundown."

"The last time I saw her, she said someone had threatened her." He hesitated.

"Who was it?"

He told me.

I got out of the sports car, climbed back into the sauna, and drove downtown to my of-

fice, stopping along the way to get a six-pack of Beck's Dark. I climbed the stairs, opened the first bottle, and sat down in front of the air conditioner. I thought I'd never cool down.

The phone rang. Probably another worried parent, a banker with a mahogany coffee table. Maybe he'd even have coffee this time. "Scofield Detective Agency," I said.

"Scofield," said the six foot eight inch voice of Thomas Flynn, "I saw you following Tim Wilkins after he stopped at my house this afternoon. I don't know what you're trying to prove, but you'd better stay out of my way if you know what's good for you."

"I don't."

"Don't what?"

"Know what's good for me. It's a problem I've always had. I think I'm too old to change, but thanks for your concern."

"Scofield, I'm not just some hick from Iowa. I have important friends. All I have to do is call them."

"I'm glad to hear that, Flynn. We all need friends. They're critical to our social development. Why don't you call some of your friends and have them come by for a sneeze. Start with the mayor and work your way up to governor."

"Scofield, I'm warning you—"

"Sorry, Flynn, my beer's getting warm. Gotta run." I hung up.

I sat there until evening, making steady progress with the six-pack of Beck's Dark. Germans make the best beer. It's hereditary. You can read about it in *The Origin of Species*, right after the part about the telephones.

At eight o'clock I went downstairs to dinner at the Chinese restaurant. The food tasted as lousy as always.

An hour later I drove down West River Drive. At O'Donnell Stadium, beside the approach to the Centennial Bridge, young men were hitting baseballs with more joy than they would ever feel again for anything else. I crossed the bridge.

It was dark by now. I parked half a block away and got out of the car. The night was hot and still. I took out my automatic and worked on the slide. With the safety off and the gun in my hand, I walked to the small frame house and tried the door. It wasn't locked. Quietly, very quietly, I pushed it open and walked in.

He was sitting in an easy chair with his back to the door, watching a cop show on television. A floor lamp burned in the corner of the room. The noise

from the TV covered the sound of my footsteps. I stopped and pointed the pistol. "Hello, Spoon," I said.

He jumped out of the chair. "Don't get excited," I said. "You and I need to talk."

"No, we don't," he said. He looked at me with more hatred than any one man should be allowed to have.

"Yes, we do. We need to talk about Cindy Reed. Why'd you kill her, Spoon?"

"Who told you that?"

"I'm the one with the detective's license, Spoon. I'll ask the questions. In case you didn't notice, I also have the gun. Let's get back to the questions. I'll try to keep them simple. Why'd you kill Cindy Reed? Wouldn't work for you, would she? That must've been frustrating for a two-bit pimp like you. You like to push women around, don't you, Spoon? You're a real tough guy when it comes to someone half your size."

"You can't prove a thing."

"I don't have to prove a thing. All I have to do is give the police a suspect. Then they'll come up with all kinds of proof: strands of hair, fibers from your clothes, fingerprints, handprints, DNA tests. Did you know that they can even take your fingerprints from human skin? They're real skillful at

that." All this was a good deal more problematical than I was implying, but I knew that Spoon wouldn't know fingerprints and DNA tests from a cue ball. "I hope this isn't too complicated. It's not the sort of thing you learn running a whorehouse, is it, Spoon?"

He was breathing hard now. I could see that he was about to detonate. "We don't have to sort out all these details, Spoon," I said. "We can let Lieutenant Doyle worry about them. Better not try to smash his head against a refrigerator, though. You might make him cross, and he's a lot bigger than Cindy was."

He started toward me. He was big and strong, and I knew he could squash me like a calzone. But I had the artillery. I fired a warning shot across his prow. It had the desired effect. He stopped like a boulder, but he was still leaning in my direction. I aimed the automatic at his chest and kept my finger on the trigger.

A vision of the Reed house ran through my mind: the basketball pictures, the newspaper articles, the blue ribbons, the pincushion. Then the vision passed, and all I could see was the sneer on Spoon's face and the spot on his chest where I was aiming. The gun felt warm in my hand.

Two things kept me from pulling the trigger. The first was my commitment to the rule of law. The second was the command "Don't move! Police!" as six Rock Island cops came through the door like Grant taking Richmond. They pushed me out of the way and told Spoon to sit down and shut up. I clicked the safety on and put the Browning back into its holster. My hands were shaking. I must have had too much beer.

Lieutenant Doyle was a little sharp with me when he arrived, but I didn't mind. I told him what I knew about Spoon, and Doyle sent him downtown for a man-to-man talk. "Your boys got here real quick," I said after Spoon had departed with a personal escort, "almost before the shot stopped echoing. They must've been following young Spoon."

"They weren't following Spoon," Doyle said. "They were following you. They took over from the Davenport police as soon as you crossed the bridge. We've been tailing you ever since you called me the other day. The connection between Harry Blake and the name Matt Christian aroused my curiosity. I thought you might be onto something, but I knew you wouldn't tell me until you were ready. That's one of your many faults."

"Sorry. It's hereditary."

"You were associating with a rough crowd, though, so I thought we should look after you. Along the way I figured out who your client was. I'm afraid we're going to have to look into the movements of Timothy Wilkins. There's no telling what we'll turn up."

"No telling at all, lieutenant. But before you disturb his father, could you do me a favor?"

"What's that?"

"Wait until I collect my fee."

Doyle waited, and Wilkins paid me. He had to, didn't he? I'd investigated his son's gambling, just as I said I would. I'd promised nothing about his drug dealing, hadn't even known about it. I can't stop the police from enforcing the law, no more than I can stop the farmers from planting soybeans. I have no desire to do either.

I cashed the check right away and kept the money in my wallet a few days. The extra weight kept me from floating away. Two days after the police arrested Spoon, I drove out through the afternoon heat to see Cindy's parents again.

Doyle had already talked to them, and they had read the newspapers, but I thought they might want to hear my version of the truth. Truth is the only

thing I know that's harder to find than money.

They took me with them to visit Cindy's grave in a little country cemetery beside a white church. It was the last thing on earth I wanted to do, but I didn't know how to refuse. Once we got there, I didn't know what to say or what to do. I didn't know why Cindy had been born or why she had to die or what all this meant. I did know that farm girls shouldn't have to choose between packing plants or casinos. There ought to be something else. I

don't know what it is, though, or how to find it.

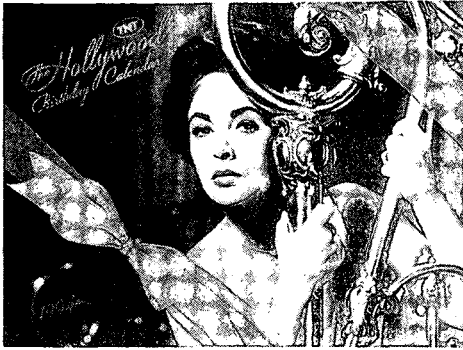
A gust of wind blew dirt in our eyes. We got into my car and drove back through the hills to the farm, where we said goodbye.

I stopped for dinner on the way home. By the time I got back to Davenport, it was dark. I drove down to the Mississippi and got out of my car. Across the river, the *Blackjack Queen* pulled away from its berth and turned downstream, all four decks aglow. It picked up speed, went around the bend to the south, and disappeared.

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The City Different

by D. J. Bart



After ten minutes of manic preening, I'd managed to scatter broken teeth from Kevin's wimpy blue comb all over the motel bathroom counter, with a few lying in the bottom of the white porcelain sink. And *still* my hair looked as if someone had draped an electrocuted badger

over my head. Frustration tightened my gut as I told him, "We need a contingency plan."

Furrowed muscles stretched across Kevin's taut brow as if his ears were in a tug of war. "What's wrong with the plan we got?"

The man's got a great bod and a face that'd demote Ado-

nis to runner-up status, but I'd been down this same boggy road with my newly recruited partner in crime before—figured the way to get through all that blond hair and dense cranium was with a gentle explanation, but who's got the patience?

"Kevin!—*contingency* means backup," I shouted, tugging savagely at my explosive hairdo. I railed on, "If the first plan doesn't work, then you've got something to fall—" And I let it go. He was counting cigarette holes in the carpet.

Unable to curry the mass of mutinous follicles into something even vaguely human, I tossed the crippled comb into the wastebasket. It was time for "work" anyway.

I slipped on a thin ecru pirate's blouse, leaving the top two buttons undone (distracting the mark never hurts), then stepped into a rust-colored, long Southwestern skirt with a braided leather belt. Added a black silk neck-scarf for that vaguely moneyed look, important to my task. Then slipped on imported vaquero boots, favored footwear of the *nouveau riche* here in Santa Fe.

"You look good," Kevin assured me, pulling me toward him, grinning as if he believed tooth enamel to be an aphrodisiac. Then frowned, adding,

"You haven't changed the plan, have you?"

Slipping a single curled finger under his chin—a deeply cleft masterpiece Michelangelo might have sculpted—I lifted gently. "Kev, plan A is plan A, you dig? It's just that we should figure out what to do if the failure of 'A' necessitates a fallback."

He tried on an intelligent expression, but it was way too tight for him; came out looking mildly distressed, in a gastrointestinal sort of way. "Run it by me just one more time—the plan A," he begged as I removed my manicured finger.

Snugging up my pantyhose, I reluctantly led my handsome friend through our little planned adventure of the day. "I go in and lay out the bars on a counter—tell him they're part of an inheritance and I'd like to sell them—guy says okay and pays me—I come out and we head for Denver."

"And if there's trouble?" Kevin asks, getting up and checking himself in the mirror, running a thick, tanned finger along the brim of his black cowboy hat.

"Well, that's what I meant about a contingency plan, Little John."

Kevin frowned at the reference. The only literary tidbits he'd allowed to sully his feck-

less mind were marked passages from one of Henry Miller's books.

Then, nodding slowly, he says, "I get it, contingency . . . plan B."

So we bandied it around. But after an hour we broke for pizza—Kevin went out for it—without having come up with anything other than the disturbing probability that if things went wrong we would panic and run around in circles, yelling at each other.

Finally we get to the Gold Dust Jewelry Exchange on Cerrillos Road. Kevin's behind the wheel of his luxurious three-hundred-year-old yellow convertible, a big barge of a car that looks as if it'd been a Beirut taxi in a previous incarnation. I'm loading my purse with fake silver bars.

"Hey, Madison, I know a better place than Denver after this job." Kevin's white teeth flashed between words, some kind of severed flora jutting from the corner of his mouth. Appeared to be the spine of a cactus.

"That thing pricks you and you'll have a mouth full of swollen tongue," I said, the last hundred ounce bar in my Earth Day canvas shopping bag, checking my face and shell-shocked hair in the canted mir-

ror. Adding the final touch, 'designer sunglasses.

Five heavy bars—over forty pounds of silver-coated lead. I'm thinking, if this bag gives me a pulled muscle, I'm going to figure a way Kevin can lug it in for me on future jobs. Trouble is, if he opens his mouth nobody would believe we had the means by which to have acquired all this bullion. I'm not saying he's stupid, just that I may have fashioned the silver headband for his black cowboy hat a little too tight.

"How 'bout we go down to Carlsbad Caverns . . . they's really bitchin'," he says, absently assuring himself that all three earrings in his right lobe are still there.

"That's right, you lived around here, huh?"

He blinked as if I'd just caught him in my headlights or with his hand somewhere it shouldn't have been.

Chuckling, I reminded him, "It was your idea to come over here to Santa Fe, doofus."

His retort was erratic and too boring to relay. But, something interesting: when Kevin talked, especially if he was excited, his pectoral muscles would jump with each word, one after the other, making it look like a couple of precoitus tortoises were twitching around inside his black Garth

Brooks T-shirt. I didn't know if this weird gesture was a *tell* or not, but it's been my experience that most people have hidden agendas.

Entering the jewelry exchange with this strange image of spastic pecs in my mind put me off my usual internal cadence a bit, but I steadied up, intent on relieving the place of some cash for trash. But as I swept through the door, studiously affecting the carriage of someone with big bucks, a small bit of doubt still nibbled at my brain stem, the way a minnow tickles your bare toe until you're ready to scream. Something about Kevin.

Thusly preoccupied, I tripped over the owner, dropping my bag and spilling fake bars onto a lake of blood spreading out around him on the floor. I recognized him, a skinny unpleasant man, from my previous visit to scout out the territory. Pieces of counter glass seemed to be floating in the blood—tiny ice floes in a crimson puddle.

It appeared that much of the merchandise had been liberated from the display cases, but my eye skipped over and then returned to a single half-ounce Maple Leaf gold coin inexplicably on its edge inside the case. Probably missed by the perp when he'd been plundering around in all the broken glass.

And for some reason the idea of the coin remaining on its edge after all that crashing about of the glass seemed fascinating, like the weirdly deposited wreckage a tornado leaves in its wake. I stared at the coin, and of course thought of pocketing it, thinking what a neat *objet* it would make for Kevin to hang around his thick neck.

"Okay, sister, put your hands up!"

This command came from behind me. To my left, the image of a uniformed cop with a plastic pistol trained on my back was reflected from a fairly large shard of glass. I immediately weighed my chances of initiating an immediate departure, only vaguely curious as to why a cop carried a toy gun in this town, but then noticed the plastic gun wasn't a water pistol, it was a Glock 9mm automatic with enough firepower to disassemble even the most carefully constructed escape plan.

I raised my arms, explaining, "Jus' got here, officer, the place and man were already both wrecked," and immediately regretted the flip remark, just the kind of thing a sociopath would say.

One after the other, my hands were pulled down and to the center of my back and cuffed. I'm thinking, well, this

is a contingency, what's the goddamn plan?

The Miranda ringing in my ears and red-splattered fake silver bars at my feet, my mind suddenly seemed wholly autonomous, scanning for some kind of pleasant, hopefully removed image . . . my thoughts drifting back a few weeks and eleven hundred miles west to my little house overlooking the Pacific headlands in Mendocino, California . . . an ever-turbulent ocean throwing itself against the rocks below my place in perpetual sacrifice, while I labored over my nefarious alchemy out in the moss-encrusted garage . . .

"What's in the tank?" Kevin had inquired, wrinkling his nose at the smell of the silver-plating solution inside the large rectangular fish aquarium.

We'd met just the week before at an outdoor blues concert in Ukiah; he'd hit on me with a lame come-on about destiny or some such crap, which I'd pretended to buy with a starry-eyed, "Some things are meant to be." And now, for some reason, I trusted him enough to explain my illicit means of support, showing him how I worked my metallurgical magic.

"Careful," I admonished, replacing the cover on the tank, "that's got cyanide in it."

Beneath the surface of the clear solution inside the aquarium rested four copper-painted bars of lead, slowly accruing a thin facade of silver. Slender anodes hung in the lethal liquid, shedding invisible particles of precious metal that an electrical current carried through the solution, depositing them on the copper-coated surface of the lead bars.

From a high dusty shelf over the tank I removed a couple of seemingly identical bars and held them toward Kevin. Each was flat and weighed one hundred ounces. Both were stamped with the Neirbert/Cranxston silver mine logo, plus their weight: One hundred troy ounces.

"Which one's the fake?" I asked him, brushing a cobweb off one of the bars with my flannel shirtsleeve.

His frowning face reflected dully in the bright surface of the bars as he hefted one, then the other. With what I suspected was a Herculean effort to appear interested, or perhaps merely sentient, he closely scrutinized the two bars, holding them up to the dim illumination of the skylight. Outside, the cool summer fog pressed its pale counte-

nance against the plastic bubble like a curious spirit.

"Beats the horse-pucky out of me," Kevin announced finally, but with a dazzling smile. His teeth seemed to be proud of themselves.

I took the authentic silver bar from his left hand. "This one's worth about six hundred dollars," I said placing it back on the shelf.

After using the counterfeit bar for a couple of bicep-bulging curls, Kevin handed it back to me. "Fake?" he asked, tilting his black cowboy hat back on his head, silver headband gleaming dully in the dim light.

I nodded. "Things go wrong—this one's worth about five to seven in one of California's lovely but restrictive penal resorts."

Bending down toward the machine resting on a low stand, I said, "But this little honey will make that eventuality more unlikely."

Kevin's eyebrows twitched once, raising minutely with only flaccid interest. The shadow across his forehead from his hat made that strip of skin appear livid and made me shudder.

Slipping the fake bar into a clear plastic sleeve, I explained, "It's a vacuum wrapper. I seal the bullion in these

plastic sleeves, just like the real bars, and the store owners don't check them."

"Do they weigh them?"

Kevin's astute question startled me. Was there a synapse or two sparking away deep within the gray labyrinth stuffed inside that black cowboy hat?

Shrugging, I told him, "Doesn't matter . . . I use a lead alloy that's the same weight as silver. It melts at only about three hundred degrees centigrade, so casting it is no problem." Gestured toward the centrifugal caster.

He glanced at the row of heat-resistant casts on the floor, the lead alloy inside them all but cooled. "Let's go into town and get a few steaks," he said, as if that was the logical conclusion to an afternoon of being tutored in the art of forgery.

At the house, as I cleaned myself up, Kevin yelled from the living room. "Who's the old lady?"

I hoped he wasn't smudging the silver frame around the brown-tone picture. Lying loudly, I told him it was a photograph of my deceased grandma.

That very afternoon, another facet of my big friend's personality kicked down the door of improbability—Kevin the protector. He'd threatened to cross

the street in Mendocino from our window seat in the Seagull restaurant and bounce some guy I'd once dated off the hood of a brown Jeep, lumpy with mud. At the time I'd had the feeling that it had been just a show of bravado, one of those pathetic macho flexings that some men do to impress. Plus, he'd given up awfully easy when I'd told him to forget about the guy.

And now, watching the confluence of old and new architecture flowing by the window of the Santa Fe police cruiser, I couldn't help but wonder where Kevin the protector had gotten to. . . .

Here's this Hispanic detective leering at me like I'm a hot fudge sundae. The man's the total and somewhat repulsive opposite of Kevin. To describe his frame as slender would be like calling a pipe cleaner kinda thin. And his black hair's in full retreat.

"So, Miss Franks, you say you were in the shop just to sell some silver bullion, that right?" Detective Aguilar asked, surprising me by having not the slightest accent.

"Correctamundo, señor."

He frowned.

I couldn't believe it, he took it as a slur.

"I don't have a racial bone in my body," I exclaimed.

Which he immediately applauded with a slow perusal that had a palpable effect on my skin. He was one of those guys who interprets your reaction to them in the way that most compliments their self-image, surmising that my declaration of liberal orientation meant I'd love to wrinkle the sheets with him. In his dreams.

"Well, it will probably shock and amaze you, Ms. Franks," he said, a sardonic grin crinkling his brown face, "but those silver bars of yours are counterfeit."

"You telling me that my sainted grandmother would leave me fake bars?"

A chuckle. And I knew what was coming. He was about to tell me that they'd checked my house in California and found my little factory in the garage. And that my grandmother was not sainted or dead. She was still in the Packsfield Home for the Criminally Insane, where they'd put her after she'd killed her second husband, an abusive rodeo organizer who had treated her worse than his animals. And those poor critters' condition had been an ASPCA nightmare.

The detective surprised me, though.

"No, I'm sure your grandmother's gift was well-intentioned, Ms. Franks, but we'll just keep the bars, since they're fake. And since a witness spotted a man coming out of the shop some time prior to your going in, carrying a bag and in a hurry, we're letting you go. The girl will take your statement, and uh, we'd like an address other than the one on your driver's license—that one's a laundromat in Santa Rosa, California."

Oh, I'd forgotten about the fake address. He must've had the cops out there check it out.

Nodding, I rose and followed "the girl" out to her desk. She's telling me, "You know, we got a Santa Rosa here in New Mexico."

I gave her a Sacramento address, it was either a pizza parlor or a hardware store. She asked if I liked Sacramento—and what's that name mean?—wasn't that what they put in olives?

Outside the station, Kevin was nowhere around, so I rode a replicated antique trolley back to my motel. On the way the driver told me and some wide-eyed tourists more about the city than I cared to know—the population would have been enough—told us three times about its being dubbed

"The City Different" by the local PR boys.

—headed for the motel office in hopes of getting some complimentary aspirin.

Pushing open the door was more difficult than one would imagine, even in a little ma and pa crackerbox like that one. The reason was large—dressed in a plaid shirt and Bermuda shorts—and prone.

The manager. And, of course, lying in a pool of blood.

I turned to the sound of sirens. The parking lot filled with a world of flashing lights atop a large number of brake-squealing police cruisers. Guns were drawn—the sound of flat feet on hot tarmac.

"Well, Ms. Franks," Detective Aguilar said, whirling in through the door like a wiry toreador, "guess I was too quick in releasing you."

Sighing, I said, "Same scenario, detective—he was down and out before I got here." I noticed that my tone sounded unconvincing, even to me.

"Don't believe in coincidences," the detective told me, scratching at a skinny brown wrist encircled by a silver and turquoise bracelet vaguely resembling a rattlesnake.

Coincidences? I didn't believe in them, either. It had to have been Kevin. That obtuse hunk of masculinity must have killed

both men... he must have done the jewelry exchange guy when he'd gone out for pizza. Why he had killed this poor man I had no idea.

I told Aguilar about Kevin, sketchily, leaving out my hint of complicity in a planned scam. By either of us. Just that he'd maybe gone to the exchange before me and robbed the place, killing the owner. And that I'd met him just a few weeks ago.

"Saying this guy set you up, huh?"

"Absolutely... I mean, who called you about this guy?" I asked, gesturing with a nod toward the manager on the floor but without looking at the body.

Aguilar answered wordlessly, with an expression that clearly showed he doubted much of what I said. A sadness appeared in his brown eyes, but I had a feeling there wasn't much sympathy floating around behind those dark orbs.

Handcuffed again and heading for the station, I found my mind hopelessly mired in petty notions: somehow the whole town of Santa Fe had found out about my fraudulent intent and initiated a community effort to frame me by killing two of their own, or my karma had reached critical mass and collapsed in a

moral implosion. Of course, these speculations were just a pathetic case of denial—I didn't want to admit that Kevin had used me.

"... real nutcase," the voice said.

The cop driving us to the station was dazzling Detective Aguilar with his vast knowledge of the mentally disturbed. Motioning toward me with a backward nod, he continued, "See, detective, she killed both of them—probably in a paranoid frenzy."

Pontificating jerk.

Then I thought of Grandma. What would she do now? Without me to pay the lawyers, she would end up in a windowless cell somewhere instead of being released in a couple of years.

"I usually don't read 'em this wrong," Aguilar was saying to the driver as we pulled up in front of the police station. "Figured this babe for a scam artist at most, not a killer."

I didn't even flinch at the "babe." Numbed to the max, I just stared out the side window, slowly accepting that it must have been Kevin... talk about reading 'em wrong.

Tourists were milling around the red brick territorial house, probably visualizing oldtime hangings of famous outlaws. The thought made me swallow hard.

A little girl with an ice cream cone melting down her arm stood in the hot sun, crying loudly and staring at a large fly that had mired itself in her treat. But nobody was paying attention; her mother was busy choosing which piece of Indian jewelry to try on next from the blanket an old woman had laid out on the sidewalk. Finally the crying child sat down right where she had been standing, letting the cone splatter onto the concrete.

The cruiser door opened, and Aguilar nodded at me to get out. A woman TV reporter stepped up, the high desert sun glaring off an impossibly white jacket. "Did you do it?" she demanded, with that First Amendment arrogance in her carefully modulated voice. A camera lens winked in the sunlight at me from over her shoulder. I could hear the faint hum of its motor. How can these people show up so fast?

Feeling Aguilar staring at me, poised as if waiting for my confession, I said to the reporter, "No, I didn't do it."

I glanced to my left just in time to see the little girl's mother jerk her upright, spanking a tiny bottom so hard the child's head snapped backward, a feeling I identified with from some long dulled memory. I stared at the ice cream cone,

jutting up from the sidewalk like an inverted mushroom, the fly entombed somewhere in the soggy mass. Twin rivulets of milky liquid seeped from the cone toward the curb, edges already drying in the hot sun.

Violence comes in all degrees, I thought, my eyes connecting with the dark gaze of the old Navajo woman sitting near the courthouse steps on a folding chair, her jewelry casually arranged on a red and black blanket at her feet. Skin gathered on my bare arms as I felt her chilled indifference to my plight—this well-dressed Anglo girl—but oddly, it made me smile. The corner of her mouth twitched a subtle response, a grin just behind those tight, thin lips.

The reporter moved . . . and I could see Kevin!—down an alley and across the far street—getting into his crummy convertible, pulling his black cowboy hat down over his eyes with a hard jerk, a self-satisfied gesture of finality.

Something about the way he did that . . .

He had a dilapidated stock trailer on the back. I could just make out the scrawny form of an emaciated horse inside. (Where the hell'd he get the trailer?—not to mention the horse.)

Kevin glanced back down the street, checking traffic; the silver headband I'd made for him twinkled, mocking me. Traffic was bumper to bumper, tourists gawking at the wonder of mud buildings and shops full of trinkets.

The busted-up yellow convertible inched forward, the horse trailer swaying on useless shocks. A mini-van with Kansas plates contentiously sprang at the convertible, the driver braking hard just inches away, lying on his horn.

Kevin stabbed the air a couple of times with his middle finger and then lurched forward, the trailer swaying dangerously, the horse whinnying frantically.

A finely cultivated sense of self-interest aggressively prodded me. "Aguilar!" I shouted, getting in his face. "That's Kevin—there!—with that trailer behind the yellow Caddy."

Aguilar squinted into the sun, and as we looked, the end of the trailer slipped out of sight, obscured by the building at the far end of the alley.

The cop next to him said, "That was a *Buick*, lady," smirking at Aguilar as if my misnomer was further proof of his earlier diagnosis.

"You saw the car?" Aguilar asked the guy.

The patrolman nodded, shrugging.

"Follow the damn thing—get the tag number," Aguilar commanded.

During my one phone call, I'd told my lawyer of the situation and about Kevin framing me. He said he'd let my grandma know, and before I could tell him not to, he had hung up. Damn. Now she would really freak out.

Two days later. "Well, Ms. Franks, we found your friend," Aguilar was saying as he opened the door to my cell. His beige suit looked new, contrasting vividly with the chipped green paint on the square bars.

"Kevin?"

He nodded. "Dead, in a Tucumcari motel room. Poisoned. Found a mixture of sleeping pills and other drugs in the bottom of his coffee cup from room service. Enough to kill a horse."

My heart stuttered.

"... found the gold and silver from the jewelry exchange spread out on the bed around him."

Until the pain throbbed its way through my consciousness, I wasn't aware that I was banging against a sharp metal edge near the door to my cell with tiny little jerks of my head.

Aguilar was studying me. "Did you know he was related to you?"

A cold shiver rippled under the skin on my shoulder blades. "What?" I asked, staring at the diminutive detective in his new tan suit with the brown shirt, sunset-orange tie.

"The guy your grandma killed? Kevin was his son."

I squinted, flagging down a passing memory . . . that alley near the courthouse, Kevin pulling his black cowboy hat down hard, as though pissed off. Then an image of Grandma's second husband doing the same thing out by the tacky pole-corral where he kept his scrawny stock out in Barstow.

And there *had* been a son, but he'd been in Europe with the Air Force during the time of the marriage. I had never seen him. And the old man wasn't the type to have pictures. . . . Some fragment of a conversation about the son being in weight lifting, interservice competition. . . .

The detective was talking. "... had a rodeo stock business near Las Vegas."

I frowned.

"Las Vegas, New Mexico . . . northeast of here," Aguilar explained.

"He set me up?"

"Those people live by the feud, must have looked you up out in California, figured he'd pay back your grandmother for killing his old man by hurting the one person she loved."

"But who killed him?"

Aguilar shrugged and turned, gesturing with his chin for me to follow. "A partner, probably, but it might have just been somebody he bragged to in a bar about all that gold and silver. Who knows?"

Wait a minute. I stopped. "But you said the stolen coins were there in the room with him."

Aguilar nodded, scratched the back of his brown neck. "All I can figure there is the guy was scared off by something after doing Kevin and left the stuff there."

"How are you, Grandma?"

"Fine, deary, and you—all over that nasty business in New Mexico?" she asked, arranging the Indian paintbrush I'd brought her. Still a pretty woman, shapely. Hair barely gray.

I nodded, although she was facing away, then glanced through the sun-drenched glass of her window and out to the sloping lawn. The telltale path of a breeze appeared suddenly in a stand of dandelion, and as quickly was gone.

Grandma sat down next to me on the bed. She patted my hand. Smelled of baby oil and cinnamon gum. Asked, "You still going to night school, honey?"

There are lies, and there are lies. I nodded.

A nurse came into the room; her pretty black face held an expression of mild scolding. "I'm not going to tell your granddaughter about you gallivanting all over creation, Mrs. Stone—I won't say a word, uh-uh."

—Grandma hushing her, poking at the woman with a finger as though all in jest. "I told you I was just down to the post office, 's not like I escaped or anything."

Now the nurse's face is incredulous, eyebrows raised, demanding, "All day an' over-night to the post office? I oughta tell the warden."

The door to Grandma's closet is slightly ajar . . . my eyes find the black cowboy hat with the headband I'd made for Kevin . . . silver glinting mischievously from behind the extra pillow on the top shelf of her closet. A trophy?

Grandma follows my gaze and then looks back at me, her eyes telling me things in that look. Dark pupils, cold . . . and warm. Not a trophy . . . more of a symbol.

*

From the hospital I drive north, through Oregon and Washington, heading toward Victoria Island to sell some bars. Heading into Canada causes me to remember the Maple Leaf gold coin I'd seen in the shattered glass case back in Santa Fe. Irrationally, I find myself wishing I could have gotten the shiny bauble—perhaps worn it as a kind of talisman against further evils.

On the beautiful island, green with nature and tourists' money, the sale goes well. No dead owners. Just plunder, to continue the dance . . .

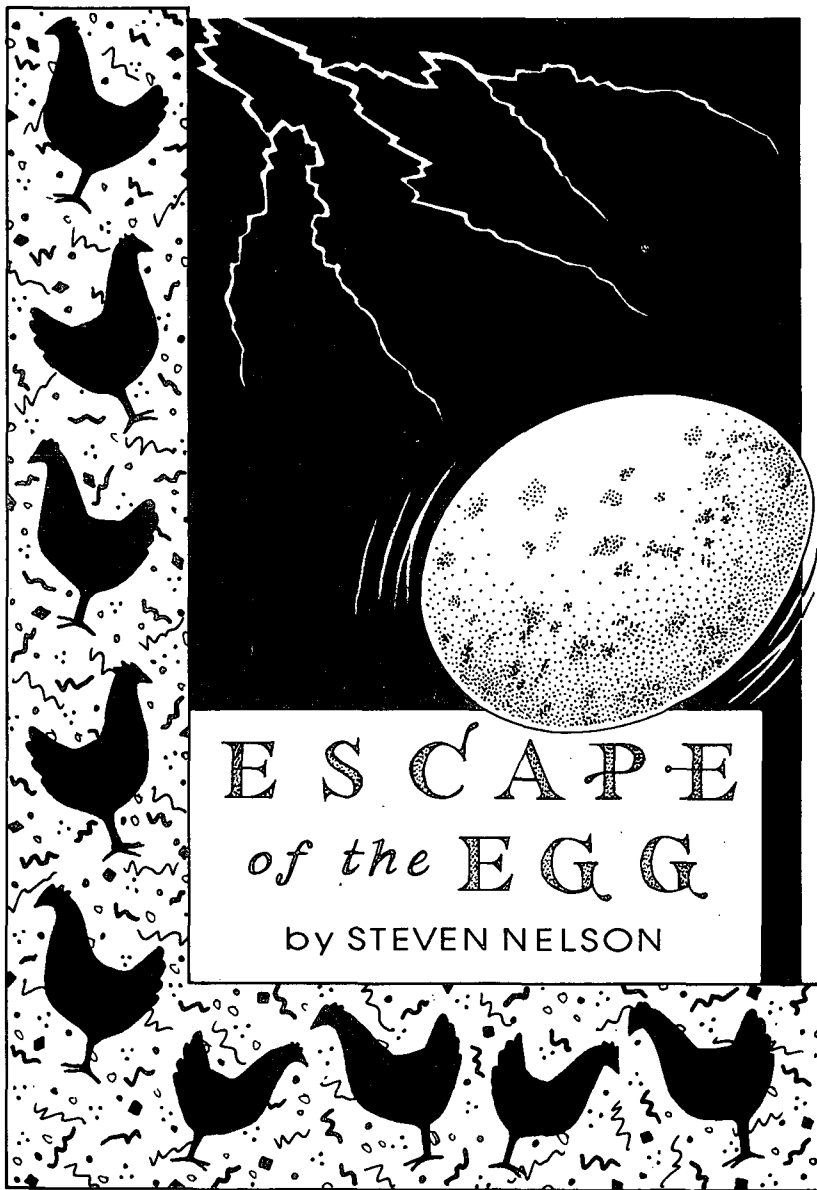
. . . and the lawyers will litigate . . . and the world will turn.

And maybe I'd go back to Santa Fe and accept Aguilar's invitation to dinner. He's skinny, little more than a tough runt really, but brains can be attractive, too.

A glance in the rear view mirror shows the electrified badger still clinging to my head in a pathetic imitation of a hairdo. Maybe back in The City Different there'd be somebody who could do something with this ludicrous tangle.

Or maybe I'd just have to learn to live with it.

FICTION



If you're ever in the neighborhood of Uncle Ned's Rustic Haven Cottages, in the Missouri Ozarks, don't stop by to say hello because I won't be there. I left way last summer, and I'm not going back. It's too bad because I like Missouri. I grew up there, and I had a nice job driving a country school bus during the school year. In summers I ran Uncle Ned's cabins for him. He's not really my uncle. He isn't anybody's uncle, but he likes the title. I worked for three summers in a row, but now he'll have to find somebody else. I can't bear the idea of going back and maybe running into Punky again. This whole thing's Punky's fault. Him and his damned deformed chicken egg.

I remember the day Punky showed up at Uncle Ned's. It was raining, hard. In fact, it rained a lot that whole August. Everything looked dark and wet and miserable, especially the trees, and the birds that were hunched on the branches, shifting from one foot to another shaking themselves. I heard Punky's motorcycle coughing before he came into view. It was a happy sound for me because I was getting lonely. All eight cabins were vacant and had been for a week. Uncle Ned doesn't like to spend money on advertising, and the Haven is so far off the main road that hardly anyone shows up there unless someone gives them the wrong directions to someplace else. In fact, I don't think Uncle Ned even owns a No Vacancy sign.

I stepped down off the porch of the cabin I used for myself, the "office" cabin. It's just like the others, but it's the first one in the row, and it has a phone, and a closet full of towels and little bars of soap and some cleaning things. I had a hat on, but I could feel the rain leaking through it. Punky was bareheaded. He rode up on that big black bike of his, splashing mud, and stopped a couple of yards from where I was standing.

"You got something with a bed, and a roof that don't leak?" he asked.

His voice was scratchy, like he'd swallowed a lot of bugs riding motorcycle.

"You've got your choice of eight cabins," I said. "They've all got beds and tight roofs."

"I'll take the most private one. How much?"

"Thirty dollars a night, in advance," I said. "You can take your bike on down to that cabin at the end, number eight, and wait on the porch. I'll go hunt up the key and bring it to you. There's a card you've got to fill out, too."

He didn't say anything, just revved his bike and headed for number eight.

I went into the office and took the key off the peg, and grabbed a guest card and a pencil, and even had sense enough to remember my umbrella. I went back outside, and all the time I was thinking what an odd looking fish that biker was. It was his hair mostly. It grew in long greasy corkscrews, and it was orange. His hair looked like the sauce that comes out of a can of tamales when you turn it upside down in a pan to cook. And his face was funny, too, fishbelly white and spattered with red freckles, like he'd stuck his nose too close to a fan. He had a red beard, parted in the middle, that stuck out like a pair of horns. A lot of his teeth were missing, about every other one, and his hands were hairy enough to be paws. But it was his eyes that bothered me most. He moved them around a lot when he talked. Up, down, over to the side. He never seemed to focus on anything. And they were bloodshot eyes, with faded, blotchy, blue centers like pieces of blue cheese. He didn't make too good a first impression.

When I got down to number eight with the key, I noticed that Punky's bike was pushed under a tree and covered with a horse cloth. I didn't know it at the time, but that bike was the only thing Punky did take care of, except for maybe that chicken egg of his. He was sitting on the porch, waiting, and stropping a big white-handled knife on the sleeve of his leather jacket. That jacket might have been black at one time, but now it was a purple red, with yellow blotches, and was patched here and there with black electrician's tape.

"That's quite a knife," I said.

"I guess you know an Arkansas toothpick when you see one," he said, sticking the knife in a sheath sewn to the side of his boot. He stood up and held out a dirty left fist. "Here," he said, "take it."

I wasn't sure what he wanted.

"Take it," he said again. And he almost stuck his fist in my face. Then he turned his hand over and opened it, and I saw there was a crumpled ball of money on his palm. I took it and uncrumpled it, and there was three hundred dollars in fifty dollar bills.

"I want this place for ten days," said Punky.

"You haven't even seen it yet," I said.

"I snuck a look through the window. It'll do. I've got some concentrating to do, and I need a peaceful place."

"Uncle Ned's is peaceful, all right. You can't do much better," I said.

I took him inside and turned on the lights and gave him his key. I showed him how to turn on the hot water in the bathroom without the handle falling off the faucet.

"My name's Elbert Duncan Clark Henry," I told him, shaking hands. "But nobody calls me anything but Lanny."

"Name's Punky," he said.

"You need anything, you let me know. If you don't find me in the office, I'll be back in no time. I don't stray far."

We were standing in the little kitchenette. Punky was looking inside the baby refrigerator. He stuck his head clear inside and kept it there for awhile.

"It works," I said.

"What? I'm sure it does. I was just wondering, is there anyplace to eat around here? All I've got for food is some cheese and crackers I bought way back in South Dakota."

"The closest town is thirty miles from here," I said. "But don't worry. We keep some canned goods and things up at the office, and we sell them to guests for cost. That's the truth. Come up later and take a look. In fact, there's a big can of sauerkraut up there I'll give you for free. Nobody else wants it."

"I'm obliged," said Punky. "Nobody's offered me a free meal for I don't know how long. I'll come around a bit later."

I fixed a hamburger for supper and then fed Bart. Bart's a parrot, and his real name is Bartlett. I got him from a teacher who spent an entire summer at Uncle Ned's. He brought the parrot with him. The teacher tried all summer to write a play, but the mosquitoes kept him from it. So he spent a lot of time teaching Bart to quote almost everything. Bart got so good at talking that the teacher decided he was even more a bother than the mosquitoes. When he left, he traded Bart to me for an old cane-backed rocking chair and a big stuffed catfish with its glass eye missing that used to hang in the office. Uncle Ned checks on the Haven so seldom that he never noticed the catfish was gone.

Punky came up a couple of hours later, when it was well past dark.

"That's a fine big green bird you've got there," Punky said, spotting Bart. Bart was perched on his high wooden stand. I hardly ever put him in his cage, since I keep his wings clipped. I noticed that Punky had tracked a whole lot of mud on the floor, but I didn't

say anything. I know we aren't all raised the same.

"His name's Bart," I said. "You can pet him, but watch out for his beak. When he wants to, he can talk more than anybody I know."

"I've got a weak spot for birds," said Punky. He scratched Bart behind the ears, and Bart didn't even bite. In fact, he started rocking back and forth like he does when he's going to talk.

"As I was going up the stair," Bart sang, "I met a man who wasn't there."

"What's he mean?" Punky asked, wrinkling his forehead.

"Nothing," I said. "Bart never means anything at all, he just talks. A teacher taught him."

"Oh. I've come for the sauerkraut," said Punky.

I showed him the cupboard where we kept the supplies for the guests. He took the sauerkraut and bought a can of mackerel and said he guessed he'd call that supper. It didn't seem like much to me, and I thought maybe he was running out of money, so I gave him a can of beer of my own, out of the refrigerator, and a bag of prunes, and I shook out some instant coffee in a Dixie cup for him.

"There's pots and pans in your cabin," I told him. "Under the sink. And there's a can opener."

"I appreciate it," he said.

"Always happy to make a guest comfortable," I said.

I found an old paper sack and loaded Punky's groceries into it, and handed him a flashlight. Uncle Ned always told me not to turn the outside lights on at night unless there were at least three cabins rented.

"A feast for kings," said Punky, looking into the sack. And I think he meant it.

When he was leaving, I said, "Goodnight. Don't let the bedbugs bite," and he turned around and gave me a look that wasn't half friendly. "It was a joke," I said. "There's not a bug within five miles of your bed." And I hoped it was true.

I don't exactly know how it happened, but by the fourth or fifth day of Punky's stay we were practically friends. That's amazing because he gave me the willies about ninety percent of the time. But then, he wasn't a half bad guy when you got to know him. During the day he'd usually go off on his bike somewhere, but around suppertime he'd drop by the office. One night I asked him to have supper with me, and it became a habit. We'd eat and then

sit on the screened-in back porch, drink some beer, and talk. I'd set Bart out there with us, on his stand. We'd talk about different things: women, the newest tread patterns on truck tires, dogs we'd known, fishing, what we'd do if we won the lottery. Anything to pass the time.

I remember the last night, our last supper. We had catfish and corn and tapioca, then moved out to the porch. The yellow bug light I used for a porch light made everything look pretty sickly. It was getting ready to rain again. You could smell it. And sometimes, way off in the distance, you'd hear thunder. Punky started telling me his life's story, in a rambling kind of way.

"I don't know when my folks stopped calling me Punkin' Head and shortened it to Punky," he said. "It's been my name a long time. They even called me Punky in the army."

"You were in the army? Did you like it?" I asked.

"It was maybe the best job I ever had."

"Why didn't you stay in?"

"They asked me to leave," he said.

"The army *asked* you to leave?"

Punky nodded his head.

"One day I decided I wasn't going to call my folding shovel an entrenching tool any longer, no matter who asked me to. One thing led to another." He shrugged. "I got tattooed in the army, want to see?"

He pushed up the left sleeve of his leather jacket, which he always wore, and bared his forearm. All I could see was orange fur.

"Here," he said, "I'll clear a spot so you can see it."

And before I could say a word, he pulled out his Arkansas toothpick and shaved a swath of hair off his arm. I took a look. It wasn't a first rate tattoo, but you could tell what it was supposed to be. A cowgirl, wearing nothing but a gunbelt and a ten gallon hat. She was standing on what looked like a big cactus.

"Is that a cactus?" I asked.

"It's a coiled rattlesnake, can't you see?"

"Oh," I said. "It came out real nice. But tell me, if the army was your best job, what was your worst?"

"What? The worst? I don't even have to think twice. And, Lanny, I'm glad you brought it up. I've been meaning to talk to you about something."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I'll get to it. But let me tell you about that worst job. I grew up on a farm, though it wasn't much of a farm. We always had chickens, so I guess I know something about them. Well, a few years ago I found myself in Arkansas without a job. I looked at the newspapers, and there was an ad wanting second shift chicken gutters at a place called Maple Dale Farms. Are you with me so far?"

"I'm following you fine," I said.

"I thought that might be the job for me because I gutted plenty of chickens on the farm. So I got some directions and rode my bike over to the Maple Dale chicken farm. That is, I thought it'd be a farm. I expected a valley, with some groves of maple trees, maybe some hickories, and some big open chicken yards, and a couple of little boys in overalls throwing out seed. But it wasn't that at all. It was a *factory*. Nothing but big cement buildings. Not a chicken or a maple in sight. The whole place hit me wrong somehow. But I needed the money, and they gave me the job. I had to wear a rubber suit, and a cap. Do you know how many chickens you can gut in a ten hour shift?"

"How many?"

"I don't know. I never counted. It doesn't matter. A lot. A whole lot of chickens. I'd been there a few days when somebody told me how the whole setup works. They raise the chickens in one building. Hatch them out and feed them until they're big enough. And then they haul them over to another building, and that's where they gas them, and turn them into fryers and broilers and family packs and parts. Now, that's considerable different from a farm. On a farm a chicken gets to lead some kind of life before its head gets chopped off. It can scratch around in the dirt, eat bugs, look at the sunset, make friends, get in fights. It gets to *live*. But imagine life at Maple Dale Farms. Imagine you're a chicken, Lanny. A fat young fryer. You've been raised in this big building, with nothing much to do, and then one day they take you and line you up with a bunch of other chickens outside. You see the sky, smell the fresh air, peck at some gravel. And maybe you catch the eye of some slick looking young hen. You're beginning to have a nice time. And then what? They haul you over to the gasser and turn you into parts. Think of it. How would you like growing up across the road from a place where you knew you'd be turned into parts someday?"

"I guess I did grow up that way," I said. "The graveyard was only a couple of blocks from our house. You could see it if you climbed onto the roof of the tool shed in the backyard. I used to climb up and watch them bury people."

"I hope it hasn't marked you for life," said Punky.

"I can't tell that it's marked me at all."

"You're lucky. But if you were a chicken it'd be different. A chicken's less complicated. I felt as sorry as I could for those chickens at Maple Dale Farms. And then I started getting mad. After a couple of weeks I quit. They made me wait for my paycheck. I had to go back for it a few days later. And while I was there, I decided to get a good look at the inside of that building where they hatched the chicks. I hadn't been in there yet. There was a bunch of grade schoolers and their teacher lining up to take a tour, so I lined up with them. They took us in and showed us a lot of things that didn't matter. Machinery. But then we came to this room that was nice and warm and lit with red lights. And the first thing I saw was a conveying belt, moving slow, with eggs bobbing along on it. It was a peaceful sight.

"I saw one egg that was smaller than the others and I kept my eye on it. It started going by something that looked like a big rubber pencil eraser, with a light burning by it. And just when that little egg came alongside the light—bang—that rubber eraser jumped out and knocked the egg into a long tin trough. You could hear it bust. I leaned over and I could see maybe fifty eggs busted up in that trough. Well, pretty soon another egg came along that wasn't quite the same size as most of them. I watched it. Sure enough, as soon as it got within striking distance of that piece of rubber—bang! I was standing there amazed. I was thinking, how does it know which eggs to hit?

"Just then I saw an egg coming along that must have been twice the size of the others, and speckled. I thought, say your prayers, buddy. It got closer and closer, and I kept watching it. It was only two feet from the eraser now. One foot. I couldn't take it any more. I knocked some of the grade schoolers sprawling and dived for that egg. I grabbed it just in time. That rubber eraser jumped out and banged me on the hand, but the egg didn't break. 'You're free,' I told it. 'You've escaped.' And I ran out of there as fast as I could. I put the egg in my jacket pocket, jumped on my bike, and I was fifty miles down the road before I stopped."

"Quite a story," I said. "What'd you do with the egg, eat it?"

"Eat it? Would you eat Bart? I took the egg to the top of a hill, with some flowers and bushes growing on it. And I held the egg up as close to the sun as I could reach, and I said, 'You're free! Hallelujah and cock-a-doodle-doo!' And I swore right then I'd hatch that egg, no matter how long it took me and raise the chick as my own."

"Don't tell me you sat on it?" I asked.

"Quit talking like an idiot. This is important. When that egg hatches, you're going to see something," said Punky, and I noticed his eyes were more wild than ever.

"When it hatches? Punky, you said this happened several years ago. If that egg hasn't hatched yet, it's not going to."

"I'll lay you a wager. That egg's going to hatch. I take good care of it, and I talk to it every night. I tell it all about Maple Dale Farms, and the rubber eraser, and the gasser across the road. The egg gets heavier and heavier all the time, and it makes a twitching noise sometimes. This is the closest I've been to Arkansas since I helped the egg escape. And it knows it, knows it's getting closer to its roots. I'm not sure any more if I want to be around when it hatches. It's going to be one damn mad chicken."

I didn't know what to say. I thought hard about changing the subject. Before I could think of anything to say, Punky started talking again.

"Do you want to see it?" he asked. "I've got it right here. It never leaves my side."

He reached into his jacket pocket and gently pulled out what looked like a bundle of rags. He started unwinding it, and I saw the rags were neckties. First he unwound a spotted blue tie and put it aside. Next came a fat, shiny yellow tie, with a covered wagon on it in sequins. And then came a narrow striped affair, brown and orange, that looked about six feet long. And finally, he got down to a pink silk tie that had a trout jumping for a fly painted on it, and some grease spots. Then came the egg. It was a big one, all right, but that's not what I noticed most. It was the wrong color. Instead of white or brown, it was the color of a dark bruise, and it had odd scratchings and markings on it like secret writing or tattoos.

"Punky," I said, "that egg's rotten. If it's making ticking sounds, I bet it has worms inside. Throw it out."

Punky looked pretty fierce when I said that, but he only said, "It's the color that makes it look sickly. That's my fault. Every Easter I dye it a different color. It was real pretty a couple of years

ago. Here, take ahold of it, feel how heavy it is."

"I don't want to touch it," I said.

"Go ahead. It won't bite. But be careful you don't bust it."

I took it with both hands. It did seem a lot heavier than it should have been, but I thought that might be Punky's buildup and my spooked imagination. Bart got a good look at the egg and started squawking.

"Put out the light, and then put out the light," he kept screaming. But he didn't really want the light out, he just says things without knowing what they mean.

"What's in this thing, Punky, lead?" I asked.

"What's in it? The biggest chicken in the world, that's what. And getting bigger all the time. He's just compacted, that's all."

I took a good look at the egg, and there wasn't a crack on it.

"How have you kept from breaking it so long?" I asked. "You'll pardon me for saying it, but you aren't exactly gentle. Look what you've done since you started staying in number eight. You've busted three windows, a toilet seat, a kitchen counter, and two screen doors."

"And a lamp," he said.

"What lamp?"

"That little one by the bed. I hit it with my elbow last night and bounced it clear across the floor. I can fix it, though, if you'll lend me a hammer."

"You see what I'm saying?" I said. "How can a man who's all thumbs and big toes keep a chicken egg for several years without even cracking the shell?"

"It means a lot to me, that egg. I make it my business to take care of it. And I wouldn't let most people handle it the way I'm letting you. I know you'd take care of it, too, if it was yours."

"Maybe," I said. I held the egg to my ear and listened. "It's not making a ticking noise."

"You have to talk to it first," said Punky. "Anyway, it ticks mostly late at night. Say, if you want to hear it tick, why don't you keep it here tonight?"

"No."

"I'd really like you to," said Punky. "Sometimes, I don't know how it is, that egg is a burden to me. I wouldn't mind being free of it for just one night. I might sleep better. Listen, I'm leaving tomorrow anyway. You know that. You keep the egg tonight, and I'll pick it up when I get ready to go tomorrow. Oh, and you write

down a list of what I've busted, and I'll settle with you."

"Take the egg now," I said. "I might break it."

"No, you won't. We'll find a safe spot for it."

Before I could stop him, Punky went inside and started turning on lights and knocking my stuff around. In a minute or two he was back on the porch.

"This will do," he said. "I found it by your bed."

He was holding a small pine box with *Souvenir of the Ozarks—Come Back Real Soon* lettered on the lid. I don't know why I had it, I didn't keep anything in it but some salve to ward off ticks, a scout knife, and two guitar picks carved out of turtle shell. Punky turned the box upside down to empty it. "Give me the egg," he said. I gave it to him, and he wrapped it back up in the trout necktie, stuck it into the box, and fastened the lid shut.

"Don't put it back in my bedroom," I said.

"Scared? It's just an egg, Lanny. I'll put it someplace else, though."

He went back inside and thumped around for awhile longer, and when he came out onto the porch again he looked happier than he usually did.

"I stuck it in the little drawer of that table you keep the phone on," he said. "Is that okay?"

"Are you sure you'll come back for it tomorrow?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow," he said.

"But you'll take the egg with you?"

"I've had it all these years. Would I go off and leave it? Good-night, Lanny."

"See you tomorrow," I said.

Punky pushed open the screen door and then turned back to say goodnight to Bart. Bart puffed up his feathers and squawked something about an invisible worm that flies in the night, or some such nonsense. Punky left. It was just beginning to rain, and a breeze was coming up.

I went inside in a few minutes and took Bart with me. The first thing I saw was the telephone table in the living room. I couldn't help it, I just had to look at that egg one more time. But when I went to pull the drawer open, it was stuck. The bottom of the drawer must have come loose and dropped down enough to keep the drawer from opening. More of Punky's clumsiness. I gave up on it and went to bed.

I don't usually have nightmares, but I had one that night. I dreamt I was at Maple Dale Farms, the way Punky had described it. I was a chicken, a young fryer. There were a lot of other chickens there with me, and some men wearing rubber suits and neckties were poking at us with long wooden pitchforks. They were herding us toward some big wooden carts, and across the way I could see a tall guillotine set up. The whole dream reminded me of a movie about the French Revolution I once saw. I was being jabbed along with the other chickens when I noticed that something had changed. All of a sudden I was several feet taller than the other chickens. One of the guys with the pitchforks came up and shoved me so hard I tripped over my robe. My robe? I looked down and saw that I was wearing a long monk's robe, and sandals, and I was carrying a Bible. "Wait a minute," I shouted, "you're making a big mistake. I'm not a young fryer, I'm a young *friar*."

"Keep it moving, capon," one of the guys with the pitchforks said. "It'll all be over before you know it."

"But I'm not a chicken," I yelled. "I'm not even a bird."

Right at that moment a big breeze came up, and the sky darkened. I heard a loud flapping sound, and then a head-splitting cock-a-doodle-doo. The men with the pitchforks started running away. The chickens were climbing out of the wooden carts, cheering, and throwing tiny hats and caps in the air. One fat chicken, standing near me, pointed a wing at the sky and said, "Look! Look! He's come!" I looked up, and what I saw made me fall to my knees. The biggest chicken you could ever imagine was perched on top of one of the factory buildings. A gigantic, purply red chicken with yellow blotches. In its beak it held one of the pitchfork men. The man kept struggling and screaming, and the chickens around me went wild.

"Turn him into parts," one yelled.

"I'll take a drumstick," shouted another, and laughed.

And then one of the chickens, a mangy one with a green vest and an eyepatch, noticed me and started shouting, "He's not one of us, he's one of *them*. Pluck him! Pluck him!"

And that's when I woke up. I didn't have time to think about the dream right then. The rain was pouring down now, and there was plenty of lightning and thunder. Bart was squalling in the living room. He hates storms. I switched on the light by my bed and yelled, "I'm coming," to Bart. I pulled my clothes on and went into the living room. Bart wasn't on his stand. There's a pair of glass

doors, with curtains, that lead from the living room to a patch of ground that might have been a flower garden at one time, only now it's all grown over. Bart had climbed to the top of one of the curtains. He was hanging on by his toes and squawking, "‘Out, damned spot,’" over and over. It took me a long time to calm him down, but he finally stopped shouting and came down from the curtain. I gave him a hickory nut to chew on and went ahead and locked him up in his cage, though he doesn't like that. The rain was letting up some, so I went back to bed. When I was leaving the living room, I thought I heard the phone table creak and squeak, but moisture does funny things to wood.

When I woke up next morning it was already late, but I still felt tired. The sky was gray, but it wasn't raining. I knew Punky would already be gone. I knew that before I even checked. I took my time over breakfast, then went outside to see if the storm had done any damage. It hadn't. I wandered down to number eight, and sure enough, Punky's bike was gone. I went on into his cabin. The place looked like a bear had been living in it, but I had expected that. I found his Arkansas toothpick sticking in the kitchen counter, holding down a note and some money. I looked at the money first. A hundred dollars in fifty dollar bills. Where did he get his money? I didn't want to think about it. I read the note. It said, "Sorry for the mess, Lanny. Here's some money. When the egg hatches out, I want you to name the bird Phoenix. I got the spelling out of a road atlas. One time, five or six years ago, I busted my collar bone and skinned my skull when my bike flipped on me near Flagstaff. That's in Arizona. I stayed at a mission house until I got well enough to ride again. They showed us old movies on Fridays after supper. One of them had Jimmy Stewart in it as a pilot that crashed his plane in the desert. But it ended okay. He built another plane, out of pieces of the crashed one, and flew out of there just fine. Anyhow, the plane's name was Phoenix. When that chicken egg hatches, and it's going to be soon, I want you to name the chick Phoenix Junior. Good luck. Keep in touch. Punky."

I decided right then I was going to get rid of that egg, splat it on a rock or run over it with my truck. How could I have let Punky talk me into keeping that thing even one night?

I hurried back to the office, slipping in the mud a little, and all the time I was holding onto Punky's knife. I wondered why he'd left it. For protection? But that was silly. This whole egg business was silly. I'd hurry and get rid of the thing and never think about

it any more. If Punky came back, he'd be pretty mad, but I didn't think he'd ever visit Uncle Ned's again.

The first thing I did when I got back to the office was to unlatch Bart's cage door. He was sulky and wouldn't come out, so I just let him be. Sometimes he gets that way, ruffles up his feathers and mumbles to himself, and it's best to leave him be because he can bite as good as a terrier. I tried getting the drawer of the phone table open, but it was stuck worse than ever. I got pretty mad, and yanked, and pulled, and jerked, and twisted on that poor table until the legs began to spraddle. But that drawer still wouldn't open. I set the phone down on the floor and thought I'd drag that table out in the yard and bust it up with a hatchet. But something kept me from it, I can't say what. I wasn't exactly scared of the egg, but I felt the way I always do when I see something unnatural, like a two-headed snake. I felt like getting away from it.

I thought of getting in the truck and driving off, but I knew the roads must be awfully muddy and I didn't want to get stuck someplace. I picked up the phone, thinking I might feel better if I could talk to somebody, anybody. But the phone was dead. Either last night's storm had knocked it out, or I'd jiggled something loose when I was trying to get that egg out of the table drawer. Finally I just took off walking and thrashed around in the woods until it was well past suppertime. I had to go back then, I was so hungry. And it looked like another storm might be coming up.

I ate a sandwich, standing up in the kitchen, and stayed out of the living room. Every once in awhile I'd hear that phone table give out a creak or a groan, and I'd tell myself it was only the weather making it act that way. When it got good and dark outside, I knew I couldn't spend another night with that egg. Bart was still sitting in his cage, and he wouldn't come out for anything. So I just left him there and walked down to cabin number two, taking a flashlight with me. It was too early to go to sleep, so I stayed up a couple of hours trying to read a book on water moccasins and copperheads that some guest had left behind a month or so before. But I couldn't concentrate. And to make things worse, the thunder and lightning were starting up again outside. I gave up and went to bed, but it was a long time before I fell asleep.

I had another nightmare. I was back at Maple Dale Farms. This time I was sitting in a big tub, and some chickens were pushing me down a long ramp. At the bottom of the ramp was a pair of doors with GIBLETS lettered on them. I was screaming. "Let me go,"

I yelled. "I'll do anything! I'll cluck, I'll lay eggs, I'll eat worms! Anything! Just let me go!" But the chickens kept sliding me along in that tub. I got closer and closer to the doors. When I was only a few feet away, the doors swung open, there was a flash of red light, and the whole world seemed to explode.

I woke up. The thunder and lightning were terrible. I was sure that explosion hadn't just been in my dreams. I tried to turn on a light, but nothing happened. There was no electricity. I got into my clothes somehow, grabbed the flashlight, and ran outdoors. It was raining hard. I thought I heard Bart hollering from my cabin. I ran up there as fast as the mud and the dark would let me. The place was a mess. It had a hot smell, like burned tree sap or burnt oil. I shone the flashlight around in the living room and found Bart. He had come out of his cage and was over in a corner worrying at something with his beak. He wasn't squawking any more, and he looked okay. There were bits of wood and pieces of torn curtain all over the floor. And the wind and the rain were coming in through the busted windows, and the splayed open doors, and through a ragged, scorched hole in the roof.

I shone the light around to see what had become of the phone table, but I couldn't find a trace of it, or the egg. "It's hatched," I yelled. I couldn't help myself. As soon as I screamed, Bart came out of his daze and started screeching. We made a fine pair. I was stepping across the floor to grab Bart when there was another great gash of lightning that lit up the whole cabin. The glass double doors leading out one side of the cabin were hanging off their hinges, the curtains shredded and the glass busted out. In the moment or two the lightning lasted I saw something big and white moving off into the woods. That's when I decided to leave.

I threw some canned goods and underwear and things into a suitcase. Then I scooped up Bart and ran out to the truck. I was lucky, it started on the first try.

All night I drove, with the rain coming down and the mud of the road sliding around under me. I didn't think of stopping, but I didn't know where I was going, either. I drove as fast as I dared, my headlights on bright the whole time, the windshield wipers going whack-whack-whack-squeak, whack-whack-whack-squeak, and poor Bart, huddled up on the floorboards by the clutch pedal, muttering, "The horror! The horror," until I thought he'd drive me crazy. And all the time I kept thinking, how long does it take a giant chicken to walk from central Missouri to northern Arkan-

sas? I wouldn't want to be at Maple Dale Farms when Phoenix Junior arrived.

We're down here in Mexico now, Bart and me. Down near the tip of the Baja. I clean swimming pools at the hotels, sell shells I find on the beaches, and fish. I even have a little boat, and a room over a hat shop. I never look at American newspapers. I keep to myself as much as I can. I'm trying to learn Spanish, and how to carve animals out of ironwood. For a long time I wouldn't eat eggs, but I decided that didn't make sense. Now I eat all the eggs I can hold. I buy them fresh at the market place, a dozen or more a day. I wish I could eat even more.

About a week ago, Bart turned out to be a girl. He was fussing with a wastebasket of mine, and before I knew what was happening, Bart had lined it with a plaid shirt of mine and laid an egg. A little speckled egg. I knew what I had to do, but I felt bad for Bart. I took that egg, fried it in butter, and ate it with a tortilla and some jelly. It went down just fine. But Bart won't forgive me.

I still keep his—her—wings clipped, but that parrot gets around pretty good using two legs and a beak. The other day he—she—climbed out the window and up a palm tree. I can see her up there at the very top. She won't come down. She keeps looking up into the sky. What's she looking for, another parrot? Something else? I don't know. I finally climbed up the tree as far as I could yesterday. I don't like heights, and there was a breeze from the bay that kept swaying the tree back and forth. I got up just a couple of yards from Bart, and the wind was clacking the palm fronds together so it sounded like giant wings. "Come on down, Bart," I said. "It was just an egg, and it wasn't personal." Bart wouldn't budge. "Meow," she said, "meow. 'The cat will mew and dog will have his day.' Arf." What could I say to that kind of foolishness? I climbed back down to the ground, feeling a bit queasy. And last night I had a nightmare about a giant chicken, wearing a gold sombrero, who was robbing a train I was on. I woke up just as the chicken was pointing his big six-gun at me. I think it's time I made another move. Up to Greenland maybe, or over to Tibet. Anywhere will do. But I'm not going by train.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



David Seymour/Magnum Photos

"Hear the tolling of the bells,/Iron bells!" We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "January Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

Connection Terminated

by Walter
Satterthwait

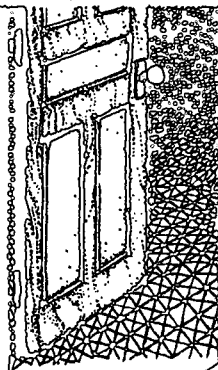


Illustration by Rodger Gerberding

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His tobacco and papers in his lap, Lizard rolled the wheelchair up to the computer console and stabbed his thumb at the power switch. As the monitor screen flickered to life and the computer snapped awake, disks clicking and whirring, he sat back and tugged open the sack of Bull Durham. Carefully, methodically, he built his three cigarettes of the evening: tapping the brown flakes along the crease in the delicate white paper, twirling the paper with practiced fingers, lightly dancing the tip of his tongue down the dainty strip of gum, gently twisting shut the ends. His hands, the skin rough and freckled with age, the ligaments ropy, were still strong and steady; he spilled no tobacco at all. With a sense of satisfaction that he knew was foolish, given the triviality of the achievement, but was nonetheless real, he placed each cigarette, one beside the other, next to the heavy crystal ashtray.

Finished, he leaned toward the keyboard and tapped out the word "com." He hit the ENTER key. The computer, clever little devil that it was, snared his communications program from the hard disk, slapped it into memory, dialed the database, logged on with his password and I.D. number. On the screen, a message announced: "Welcome, Lizard! You have E-Mail waiting. Go E-Mail? Y/N?"

He tapped at the Y key, hit ENTER.

There were two messages. He saw that one of them was from FANCY PANTS, and he smiled. The other was from someone who called himself GrungeBoy, a handle that Lizard had never seen before. Saving the best for last, he called up the message from GrungeBoy.

On the screen he saw:

MESSAGE TO: Lizard
FROM: GrungeBoy

They say around here you know everything there is to know about military history and stuff. Maybe you could help me? I'm doing a paper for my history class about the battle of Agincourt, in France. What's a good book you could recommend about this battle? Thanks for your trouble.

Reply to message? Y/N?

Lizard tapped Y, hit ENTER, composed his reply:

MESSAGE TO: GrungeBoy
FROM: Lizard

Nobody knows everything there is to know about anything, but many thanks for the fulsome flattery. Almost all the famous books about military history discuss Agincourt—you could try anything by Creasey or Liddle-Hart. But the best account, in my not-so-humble opinion, is given by John Keegan in "The Face of Battle." I hope that helps. Good luck with your paper. Let me know if I can do anything more.

He sent the message and then called up the electronic mail from FANCY PANTS. Reading it through, he smiled again, at the familiar upper-case characters, the familiar quirky punctuation, the familiar quirky exuberance. But by the time he reached the end, his smile had faded.

MESSAGE TO: LIZARD
FROM: FANCY PANTS

HEY THERE DOCTOR LIZARDO YOU NASTY OLD MAN!!! HOW YOU DOIN? HAVENT BEEN AROUND FOR AWHILE MYSELF BUT YOU NEVER NOTICED PROBABLY. WORK WORK WORK!!! JEEZE NO REST FOR THE WICKED HUH? YOU STILL HANGIN OUT IN ALBUQUERQUE??? WHEN YOU GONNA ROLL YOUR ANCIENT OLD BONES ONTO A AIRPLANE AND COME OUT AND VISIT ME IN LOST ANGELES LIKE YOU PROMISED???

OR MAYBE I CAN COME VISIT YOU!!! LOOKS LIKE THIS GIRLS GONNA COME INTO SOME SERIOUS MONEY SOON!!! WERE TALKIN BIG TIME!!! FOUND OUT THAT SOMEONE AT THE OFFICE WAS PULLING A REALLY TRICKY LITTLE SCAM AND THE TWO OF US HAD A TALK. WE DECIDED HE SHOULD SHARE THE WEALTH IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN. MAYBE ILL GIT MYSELF A NEW MACHINE—A BIG 486 WITH A SUPERFAST 9600 MODEM!!!

WANNA TALK? BE ON TONIGHT—THIS IS TUESDAY—AROUND SEVEN YOUR TIME.

Frowning now, Lizard looked at his watch. Seven fifteen. He picked up a cigarette, stuck it between his lips. From the shotglass beside the ashtray he plucked a kitchen match. He scratched its head with his thumbnail and the match flared immediately—something that, normally, would have provided another small private satisfaction. But just now he was too distracted for private satisfactions.

He sucked smoke into his lungs, typed "Go CB," hit ENTER, and

waited impatiently as the database shuttled him to the CB simulation. As soon as the screen prompt appeared, he typed in: "Locate FANCY PANTS."

"FANCY PANTS," the screen informed him "is in Living Room #9."

He typed: "Go LR9."

An instant later the screen was crowded with lines of dialogue scrolling upward, computer users all over the United States communicating with each other by modem along millions of miles of telephone lines:

Cosmic Cal: I know Clint deserved SOME kind of award, I just don't think it should've been the Oscar. "Crying Game" was a 100% better movie.

StorminNorm: "Howard's End" shoulda got it.

Esthete: Who on earth watches movies anyway?

Zorro45: Clint DID deserve it! He's been underestimated for years! "Josey Wales" was one of the best westerns ever, until "Unforgiven."

Irene Adler: If you win for Best Director, you should win for Best Film—it only makes sense, no?

FANCY PANTS: ESTHETE ARE YOU GONNA SIT THERE AND CLAIM YOU NEVER GO TO THE MOVIES?

Snoopy: How come Rob Reiner didn't get a nomination?

Dylan: I agree with Norman—"Howard's End" was the best film.

Esthete: Never, FANCY PANTS. Movies are common.

Cosmic Cal: Best western ever was "The Wild Bunch."

Irene Adler: Maybe because people can't take a Meathead seriously, Snoopy.

StorminNorm: Yeah, Esthete sits at home and admires his wallpaper.

FANCY PANTS: ESTHETE I THINK YOU'RE NOT LEVELING WITH US.

Zorro45: Right on, Cal. "The Wild Bunch" was terrific.

Lizard typed in "Hello, folks," tapped the ENTER key, and watched his own handle, electronically provided by the database, appear at the bottom of the screen, followed by his message:

Lizard: Hello, folks.

Irene Adler: The best western ever was "High Noon."

Esthete: I confess that I do like my wallpaper.

Irene Adler: Hi there, Lizard! Hugs and kisses!
 Cosmic Cal: Hi, Lizard.
 Snoopy: But he's a dynamite director, Irene. I think "Princess Bride" was awesome. Yo, Lizard!

FANCY PANTS: LIZARDO!!! HOW YOU DOIN SWEET THING?
 StorminNorm: Hey, Lizard.
 Esthete: "High Noon" was pretentious drivel.
 Lizard: FANCY PANTS, go private?
 Dylan: Hello, Lizard!
 Zorro45: 'Lo, Lizard.
 StorminNorm: Esthete, I thought you never went to the movies.
 FANCY PANTS: SURE THING LIZARD. SEE YOU THERE. BYE ALL.
 Cosmic Cal: What do you suppose Lizard and FANCY do when they go private?
 Irene Adler: Bye, Lizard. Bye, FANCY. Esthete, how can ANY-ONE call Gary Cooper pretentious?
 Esthete: Years ago that was, before I knew better.

Lizard tapped some keys. The screen went momentarily blank and then, at its top, showed only the phrase FANCY PANTS: Lizard watched as her message appeared.

FANCY PANTS: LIZARD BABY LONG TIME NO SEE. YOU'RE WELL?
 Lizard: I'm fine, FANCY. But I'm a little concerned about you.

FANCY PANTS: HOW SO LIZ?
 Lizard: Just what is it you're up to?

FANCY PANTS: UP TO?
 Lizard: Don't go coy on me, woman.

FANCY PANTS: OH YOU MEAN WHAT I SAID IN THE EMAIL MESSAGE.
 Lizard: What you said in the E-Mail message, yes. What's going on?

FANCY PANTS: LIZARD YOU'RE NOT GONNA GO AND GET ALL MORALISTIC ON ME?
 Lizard: Probably. Tell me about it.

FANCY PANTS: I CAN'T TELL YOU. I PROMISED.
 Lizard: Promised whom?

FANCY PANTS: I LOVE IT WHEN YOU TALK CORRECT.
 Lizard: Promised whom?

FANCY PANTS: THE GUY I TOLD YOU ABOUT.
 Lizard: The guy running the scam?

FANCY PANTS: UH HUH.
Lizard: Look, woman, you wouldn't have sent me the message if you hadn't wanted to talk about this. Maybe you have a few moral qualms yourself, hmm?

FANCY PANTS: NO ONE LIKES A SMARTASS LIZARD.
Lizard: Talk to Daddy.

FANCY PANTS: YOU'RE NOT MY DADDY AND IT'S NO BIG DEAL LIZARD.
REALLY.

Lizard: Then why leave me the message? What kind of scam is this guy running?

FANCY PANTS: I PROMISED I WOULDN'T TALK.
Lizard: And what do you get in exchange for not talking?

FANCY PANTS: FREEDOM.
Lizard: Freedom?

FANCY PANTS: REAL FREEDOM. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE LIZARD ILL BE ABLE TO DO ALL THE THINGS IVE EVER DREAMED OF. TRAVEL. I CAN SEE ROME. IVE ALWAYS WANTED TO SEE ROME. I CAN BUY NICE CLOTHES. ILL BE ABLE TO STOP WORRYING ABOUT MY BILLS. ILL BE A WOMAN OF LEISURE. WERE TALKING ABOUT LIBERATION.

Lizard: From what you tell me, kiddo, it sounds like we're talking about blackmail.

FANCY PANTS: THAT'S A REALLY NASTY WORD LIZARD.
Lizard: Blackmail's a really nasty thing, FANCY.

FANCY PANTS: IT'S NOT REALLY BLACKMAIL THOUGH. I MEAN I DIDN'T ASK HIM FOR THE MONEY OR ANYTHING. I WENT TO HIM TO DISCUSS SOME DISCREPANCIES IN THE ACCOUNTS. HE INVITED ME TO LUNCH AND WE TALKED ABOUT IT. HE'S A CREEPY GUY—ONE OF THOSE JERKS WHO ALWAYS KNOW MORE THAN ANYONE ELSE. HE TRIED TO BE COOL ABOUT IT BUT I THINK HE WAS FURIOUS. BUT HE DID OFFER ME THE MONEY.

Lizard: I'll bet he did. How much money are we
FANCY PANTS: LIZARD WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT ME?
Lizard: talking about? I only know what you've told me, FANCY.

FANCY PANTS: MOSTLY WHAT IVE TOLD YOU IS LIES. IM NOT 28—IM 38.
I DONT LIVE IN A CUTE LITTLE ONE BEDROOM—I LIVE

IN A FOURTH FLOOR WALK-UP STUDIO THAT HARDLY
GIVES ME ROOM TO BREATHE. AND IM NOT PRETTY
LIZARD—IM FAT. AND MOST OF ALL

Lizard: FANCY, you

FANCY PANTS: MOST OF ALL LIZARD IM NOT HAPPY AND IT SEEMS TO
ME SOMETIMES THAT IVE NEVER BEEN HAPPY.
NEVER ONCE IN MY LIFE. EVEN WHEN I WAS A CHILD.
I WAS ALWAYS FAT AND ALONE AND MISERABLE. AL-
WAYS ALONE AND WATCHING EVERYONE ELSE BE
HAPPY. THE ONLY REAL FRIENDS

Lizard: Maybe other people aren't as happy as you think
they are.

FANCY PANTS: IVE EVER HAD—EVER EVER EVER—ARE THE PEOPLE
HERE ON THE DATABASE AND THATS BECAUSE THEY
DONT REALLY KNOW ME. THEY CANT SEE WHAT A
PIG I AM.

Lizard: Stop it, FANCY.

FANCY PANTS: SPEAKING OF PIGS. BOY YOU SHOULD SEE ME NOW. IM
REALLY GORGEOUS. MASCARA ALL OVER THE PLACE.
SOB SOB SOB. WHAT A PAIN I AM. SORRY LIZARD.

Lizard: FANCY?

Lizard: FANCY?

Lizard: FANCY?

Lizard abruptly realized that he had, without thinking, finished
one cigarette, stubbed it away, and started another. Two cigarettes
in less than an hour—way over the limit he permitted himself. He
ground out the cigarette, then tapped at the keyboard.

Lizard: FANCY? Are you there?

FANCY PANTS: IM HERE.

Lizard: Good. I was afraid I'd lost you.

FANCY PANTS: NOT MUCH OF A LOSS.

Lizard: Would you stop that? Listen, kiddo, just from
talking to you on the computer like this I can
tell you're an all right person. More than all
right. You're smart and funny and

FANCY PANTS: FAT.

Lizard: a whole lot better than you think you are. Most
people are a whole lot better than they think
they are. Except for the ones who are a whole

lot worse, and you're not one of those.

FANCY PANTS: YEAH BECAUSE I COULDN'T POSSIBLY BE ANY WORSE THAN I THINK I AM.

Lizard: Well, I'm pretty sure you couldn't be any more annoying.

FANCY PANTS: HAH HAH.

Lizard: Now, FANCY, listen to me. I honestly think that

FANCY PANTS: LIZARD YOU KNOW YOU REALLY ARE A WONDERFUL MAN. I REALLY MEAN IT. HERE I AM ROLLING AROUND IN SELF PITY AND YOU'RE STUCK IN THAT CRAPPY WHEELCHAIR ALL BY YOURSELF AND YOU STILL TAKE TIME TO HELP OUT A SLOPPY OLD FAT WOMAN. I THINK YOU'RE REALLY TERRIFIC.

Lizard: Yeah, yeah. I'm a prince. Listen to me. I think that, deep down, you don't want to be involved in this business. This blackmail. I think the idea bothers you, bothers some fundamental, important part of you. I think that if it didn't you wouldn't have left me that message. I think, kiddo, that you wanted me to talk you out of doing it.

Lizard: FANCY?

FANCY PANTS: IM HERE.

Lizard: What are you thinking?

FANCY PANTS: IM THINKING YOU'RE TOO DAMN SMART FOR YOUR OWN GOOD.

Lizard: One of the advantages of getting older. If you're lucky, you also get smarter.

FANCY PANTS: YOU'RE NOT ALL THAT OLD LIZARD. UNLESS YOU'VE BEEN LYING TO ME LIKE I'VE BEEN LYING TO YOU.

Lizard: No lies. I'm sixty-four. An old crippled psycho war vet.

FANCY PANTS: BUT A PRINCE.

Lizard: Well, there's that. FANCY, when did all this happen? Your lunch with this guy?

FANCY PANTS: TODAY.

Lizard: Is he running this scam all by himself or is there someone else involved?

FANCY PANTS: IM NOT SURE. I THINK MAYBE THERE'S SOMEONE ELSE.

Lizard: Is there anyone at the office you can go to with this? Someone you trust?

FANCY PANTS: YEAH. PETER ALLBRIGHT. HES ONE OF THE GOOD GUYS
I THINK.
Lizard: And will you be going to him?
Lizard: FANCY?
Lizard: Oh, FANCY . . . ?
FANCY PANTS: DAMMIT. THERE GOES ROME..
Lizard: We'll always have Paris, kid.
FANCY PANTS: HAH HAH. WHOOPS. SOMEONE KNOCKING AT THE DOOR.
WEIRD. HOLD ON LIZARD. BACK IN A FLASH.

Lizard sat back and discovered that he was exhausted. A droplet of sweat was tickling its way down his ribs. He felt as though he had been wrestling with the woman not figuratively but physically, flesh battling flesh, sinew struggling against sinew. But he felt relieved, too, and pleased with her for having made the right decision. And—let's face it, he told himself—he felt fairly pleased with the old Lizard as well. The gnarly White Knight rides to the rescue on his valiant two-wheeled steed.

Silly old man.

Still, a White Knight, gnarly or not, should get a reward now and then.

He lifted his last cigarette from the table, took it between his lips, struck the kitchen match against the table's underside, lit the cigarette.

Exhaling smoke, he looked up at the screen.

It looked back at him, the cursor blinking with a moronic metronomic relentlessness below her last message.

He glanced at his watch. Eight o'clock. An hour's difference in Los Angeles, so seven o'clock there.

Dinnertime. Strange time for a guest to call.

But maybe the guest had been invited?

No. The monitor screen still displayed the dialogue between the two of them, the last twenty-two lines of it. WEIRD, she'd said when she heard the knocking. She hadn't been expecting a guest.

Lizard sucked on the cigarette, set it in the ashtray, and, exhaling, leaned forward and tapped at the keyboard.

Lizard: FANCY?

He waited.

No response.

She wouldn't be able to see the screen, of course, if she were away from the computer, talking to someone.

Someone who'd just stopped by to ask directions?

A fourth floor walk-up, she'd said. No one climbed up four flights of stairs to ask directions.

He tapped at the keyboard.

Lizard: FANCY? Are you there?

Lizard: FANCY?

He didn't want to think about it, didn't want to grant it recognition, but he knew that the awareness lurked somewhere back in a dim gray corner of his mind: there was one person, there was one man who might have come to see the woman. One man who might want to see her for a particular reason of his own.

HE TRIED TO BE COOL ABOUT IT BUT I THINK HE WAS FURIOUS.

Lizard could feel his heart knocking against his ribs. An old man's heart, thin and frail as it pounded in an old man's thin, frail chest. Lizard heart, Lizard chest.

Calm down.

His cigarette had burned away to ash.

He picked up the rolling papers, tore a sheet from the sheath, flipped the sheath to the table, fumbled open the pouch of Bull Durham. He shook tobacco onto the paper, spilling a few brown flakes along his lap. He slapped them away and then, quickly, he rolled the cigarette, scraped a match alight. Puffing, he squinted at the screen.

Lizard: FANCY?

It could be a neighbor. Stopping by to borrow something. A cup of sugar. A stick of butter.

He looked at his watch.

Seven minutes after eight. Seven minutes after seven, L.A. time. And then:

FANCY PANTS: HELLO.

The message appeared so suddenly, lunging across the screen, that it startled him. Relief hissed between his teeth as he bent over the keyboard.

Lizard: Good Lord, woman, where were you? You had me worried there.

FANCY PANTS: SOMEONE AT THE DOOR. SHE HAD THE WRONG APARTMENT. IT'S ALL RIGHT.

Lizard stopped breathing.

IT'S ALL RIGHT.

IT'S.

Such a small thing, that apostrophe was. Smaller than a flea. An insignificant speck on a cathode ray tube, a few pixels, a tiny, fragile fleck of phosphor electronically illuminated, destined to disappear, forever vanish into the ether, as soon as the power drained away.

In all the time they had talked together on the database, all the hours they'd spent tapping away at each other late into the night, FANCY had never used an apostrophe. Never once.

Make certain, he told himself.

Lizard: You're sure?

FANCY PANTS: I'M SURE.

And so was Lizard. A chill emptiness settled in his chest.

FANCY was gone.

And miles away, in that small apartment somewhere in Los Angeles, a stranger was sitting at her keyboard.

A stranger who'd seen the dialogue on her monitor screen, and who'd known what it meant. Known that she'd been connected to Lizard.

What had he done to FANCY? Hurt her?

Something worse?

And what should Lizard do? What *could* he do?

All at once his mind seemed as ineffectual as his shrunken, shriveled legs. Immobilized, tangled in cobwebs, useless.

Think, you old fool.

FANCY PANTS: LIZARD?

Lizard took a deep breath, leaned toward the keyboard.

Lizard: Yes?

FANCY PANTS: CAT GOT YOUR TONGUE, LIZARD?

All at once Lizard was filled with a swift, shivering rage—at himself, at his own impotence, at this smug, self-possessed bastard sitting at FANCY'S computer, using FANCY'S name.

Lizard: Put her on.

FANCY PANTS: COME AGAIN?

Lizard: Put her on. Now.

FANCY PANTS: WHY, LIZARD, I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT.

Mocking. The sonofabitch was enjoying this.

Lizard: I know who you are.

FANCY PANTS: WELL, OF COURSE YOU DO. I'M YOUR OLD FRIEND, FANCY PANTS.

Lizard: Put her on, you schmuck.

FANCY PANTS: MY, MY. SUCH LANGUAGE, LIZARD. YOU REALLY SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELF.

Lizard: I'll make a deal with you. Put her on and I won't go to the cops with what I know.

FANCY PANTS: AND WHAT MIGHT THAT BE?

Lizard: Everything. She told me everything.

FANCY PANTS: I RATHER DOUBT THAT.

Lizard: Put her on.

FANCY PANTS: WELL, WE'VE GOT A BIT OF A PROBLEM THERE, LIZARD. SHE'S UNAVAILABLE AT THE MOMENT, YOU SEE. A TOUCH INDISPOSED.

Lizard: Put her

FANCY PANTS: SHE REALLY DOES WEAR FANCY PANTS, YOU KNOW. PINK, WITH A SORT OF FRILLY LACE ALONG THE HEM. PATHETIC, REALLY, UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES. YOU AGREE?

Lizard rapped at the EXIT key.

Exit Private Talk? Y/N?

Y

Exit CB simulation? Y/N?

N.

Command?

Go User Index.

USER INDEX

Search by:

1. Handle
2. Last Name
3. City
4. State
5. Computer
6. Interests

Please enter a number.

1

1. Search by Handle. Handle?

FANCY PANTS

Handle:	FANCY PANTS
Name:	LESLIE D'AMICI
St. Address:	405 MACALLISTER, 4B
City:	LOS ANGELES
State:	CALIFORNIA
Zip:	90069
Hm. Phone:	1-310-555-7825
Age:	28
Sex:	FEMALE
Computer:	IBM/286
Interests:	COMPUTERS, FOOD, TRAVEL, FOOD, MOVIES, FOOD

Her name was Leslie.

He hadn't known that. He had never looked her up in the Index, never learned her real name. Without ever consciously thinking about it, he had believed that somehow this would be an intrusion, a violation of her privacy.

Leslie D'Amici.

And she was not twenty-eight, but thirty-eight.

If Lizard was right—and he knew that he was, and he hated the knowledge, almost hated himself for possessing it—she would never be thirty-nine.

Lizard tapped a key, and his printer briefly clattered as it copied, onto paper, the contents of the monitor screen. He tore free the sheet, hit the power switch. The screen went black. He scooped up the telephone receiver, dialed the number for Los Angeles information. The operator came on, her voice listless and bored, the voice of someone cocooned within the tedium of safety, untouched by danger or death. Lizard asked for the number of the L.A. police.

The operator clicked off, and a recorded voice came on and gave him the number. He broke the connection, dialed it.

"Los Angeles Police Department." A male voice, as bored and listless as the operator's, but grown weary, this one, of danger and death, become inured to them.

Lie, cheat, steal, but get someone there. "I want to report a murder." Lizard realized that he was panting, as though he'd been running a marathon. Lizard hadn't run, hadn't walked, in over forty years.

"Sir, we show that you're calling long distance. Are you sure it's the Los Angeles police department you want?"

Caller I.D. Of course. An LCD display on the telephone itself, one that revealed the phone number of the person calling in. The police would want that new technology, would find it useful.

"I'm sure," Lizard snapped. "I want to report a murder in Los Angeles."

"Yes, sir. And your name, sir?" Bored, and plainly disbelieving. An idiot.

Lizard gave his name.

"And your address, sir?"

Lizard gave it.

"And who was murdered, sir?"

"A Miss Leslie D'Amici. Apartment 4B, 405 MacAllister. Phone number 555-7825."

"Yes, sir. And how do you know she was murdered, sir?" A dull, mechanical politeness. The typed messages on the computer's screen had seemed more alive.

"I was talking to her on the telephone. Five minutes ago."

"Yes, sir," said the voice. "And what happened, sir?"

"She was murdered is what happened, dammit."

"Yes, sir. Calm down now, sir. Did you hear gunfire, sir?"

"Yes, I did. Gunfire. Now would you please send someone over there?"

"Are you sure it wasn't the television, sir? Sometimes people make that mistake."

"I know what I heard, dammit."

"Yes, sir. Please calm down, sir. You were talking to her on the telephone and you heard gunfire. And then what happened, sir?"

"I hung up the phone. I called you."

"We have no reports of gunfire in that area, sir."

"I'm reporting it, right now."

"Yes, sir. From Albuquerque. Have you tried to call her back, sir?"

"I called *you*. Look, a woman's been murdered out there. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"We'll send a unit to investigate. Don't worry, sir. Thank you for calling." From the sound of his voice, the unit wouldn't be sent until sometime tomorrow. If then.

Lizard hung up, trembling once again with anger.

Moron. Imbecile.

But calling her on the telephone. He should at least try. Maybe it *was* all a mistake. Or maybe it was some elaborate, silly joke she was playing. And when he called, FANCY PANTS—Leslie—would answer. And he would bitch at her, testy for teasing an old man, and the two of them would have a fine great laugh about it.

He knew he was deluding himself, or trying to.

SHE REALLY DOES WEAR FANCY PANTS, YOU KNOW. PINK, WITH A SORT OF FRILLY LACE ALONG THE HEM. PATHETIC, REALLY, UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES.

It was no joke.

He dialed her number.

Busy.

The bastard was still on the phone, still hooked up to the database.

Or else he'd taken the phone off the hook.

Either way, if that idiot cop called her number, if he *bothered* to call her number, he'd hear the busy signal and assume that she was on the phone, alive.

What now?

Lizard switched the computer on, watched as it connected him once again to the database. Once again he moved to the CB simulator and, within it, to the User Index. He requested the names of all users in Los Angeles who were currently connected to the simulator.

Five Los Angeles users currently online:

Romeo12

BroncoBilly

Catwoman

FourWheel

CapnKosmos

Command?

1. Send online message.

2. Send E-Mail.

Please enter a number.

1

Send online message to?

All.

Send online message to all. Message?

MESSAGE TO: Romeo12, BroncoBilly, Catwoman, FourWheel,
CapnKosmos

FROM: Lizard

This is an emergency. A database user in Los Angeles is in serious trouble. I need help. Please join me in private talk immediately.

Send as is? Y/N?

Y

Message sent.

Lizard tapped the keys that would send him to the Private Talk section of the database.

Lizard: Hello.

Catwoman: Hello, Lizard. What's the problem?

Romeo12: Hi.

CapnKosmos: Hi.

BroncoBilly: What's up?

Lizard: I was just online with a user named FANCY PANTS.

I think she's been hurt. I've tried calling the police, but they won't buy

Romeo12: This some kind of joke?

Lizard: my story. This isn't a joke—I'm absolutely serious. I need help. Someone in Los Angeles has to call them, or they won't do anything. Can one of you help me? FANCY'S real name is Leslie D'Amici. Her address is 405 MacAllister, apartment 4B. If one or more of you call and report hearing gunshots there, maybe the police'll move.

CapnKosmos: It's against the law to report something like this to the cops if it isn't true. How could you hear

gunshots if you were online with her?

BroncoBilly: L.A.P.D. has caller I.D. They can identify anyone who calls.

Lizard: CapnKosmos, I didn't actually hear gunshots. But someone's got to report SOMETHING.

FourWheel: Sorry I'm late. I know about you, Lizard. Lizard is okay, folks. If he says it happened, it happened. I'll call right now.

Catwoman: You're really serious, Lizard?

Lizard: Completely serious. Thank you, FourWheel.

FourWheel: Signing off.

BroncoBilly: Too weird. You people are nuts. I'm outa here.

Catwoman: Okay. I'll make a call.

Lizard: Thank you.

Romeo12: I'll call too, Lizard.

Lizard: Thank you, Romeo.

CapnKosmos: This is my parents' phone, Lizard. Okay if I call from a booth somewhere?

Lizard: Fine, Capn, thank you. I'm signing off now. The police may call me back. Leave E-Mail or call me on voice phone. My number's in the User Index.

He thought for a moment, then tapped some keys.

Exit CB simulator? Y/N?

N

Command?

Locate FANCY PANTS.

FANCY PANTS is currently off line. Command?

So the bastard had disconnected from the database and taken the phone from the hook.

Lizard exited from the simulator, logged off from the database, then switched off the machine.

The telephone rang, for the first time, half an hour later.

Lizard had rolled the wheelchair into the kitchen, lifted a bottle of Calvados from the cabinet, poured himself a balloon glass of the apple brandy, replaced the bottle, and rolled himself back into the living room, to the computer desk. Once again he had dialed the

phone number of Leslie D'Amici. The line had still been busy.

He had sat there, drinking Calvados faster than Calvados should ever be drunk, barely tasting it, and he had waited. He had never been good at waiting. He tapped his fingers along the wheel of his chair, sipped the Calvados, and stared at the phone, willing it to ring.

When it did, sharp and sudden, it startled him.

He slapped the balloon glass to the desk. A dollop of pale brown liquid sloshed over the lip, splattered onto the desktop. He grabbed the phone.

"Hello?"

Nothing. No voice, no breathing, not even a faint crackle of static.

Again he said, "Hello."

Nothing.

As though no one were there.

But Lizard knew that someone *was* there, and he knew who that someone was.

He waited, hearing only the sound of his own breath. Distant, as though from another body, in another room.

And at last he heard, very faintly, a chuckle, low and slow and rattling. And then, in a whispered hiss that sent frost slithering down his spine: "*Cat got your tongue, Lizard?*"

Lizard used, emphatically, a word he never used.

The faint, low chuckle came again. And then: "*She's dead meat, old man. And so are you.*"

"Come and get me," Lizard snarled.

Another chuckle, and then a click, and then a dial tone.

Lizard hung up the phone. Or tried to: it bounced from its cradle and off the desk, swinging like a hanged man on its tangled cord. Cursing, he snatched at the cord, yanked it in, slammed the phone onto the cradle.

His hands were shaking. He looked at them with mild surprise and a remote curiosity, as though those forlorn freckled lumps with their quivering fingers belonged to someone else. To some poor pitiable wretch, decrepit and feeble and terrified.

It wasn't anger now that caused the tremor. It was fear.

He had thought he had forgotten fear, battled it down, left it forever behind him. For a while it had been his entire world. During those endless hours he had spent lying in the freezing muck at the Reservoir, his spine and his life shattered, his mind gibbering

away in the darkness and pain. During those endless nights in the hospital when he came screeching out of sleep, hurling himself away from the vile, faceless, slathering monsters who stalked his dreams, hunting him across a blasted landscape, through an eternity of night. In the dreams, he could still run. . . .

He thought he had left it behind. And now here it was. An old acquaintance, despised in the past and only vaguely remembered now, yet looking after all those years exactly the same.

How had the bastard gotten his phone number?

The User Index.

His phone number, his address, his real name: they were all there, on the Index.

The bastard knew who he was. Knew *where* he was.

She's dead meat, old man.

Old man. Lizard's age was listed on the Index as well.

Come and get me.

Brave words, coming from an old man. A crippled, frightened, worthless old man.

And what if he did come?

The phone rang.

Lizard stared at it.

It rang and it rang, peremptory, its buzzer as shrill and sinister as a dentist's drill, and Lizard stared at it.

It's only a telephone. Pick it up, you stupid, gutless old man.

He reached forward, lifted the phone.

"Hello." His voice was thin and strained, as though a stranger's cold fingers were coiled around his neck. He coughed, clearing his throat.

"Is this Lizard?" A woman's voice, unfamiliar, and he felt a sudden rush of hope. FANCY?

"Yes," he said, deliberately keeping the hope from his voice, deliberately suppressing it. Magical thinking: hopes could be crushed.

"This is Karen Bartholomew. Catwoman—from the database? I, uh, I called the police, Lizard, and I gave them my number. They just called me back. They went there, some patrolmen did, to her apartment."

"Yes?" Not actually phrasing the question. More magic: as though by not asking it, he could alter the answer.

"She's dead, Lizard. I'm sorry."

Lizard took in a deep, shuddery breath. Let it slowly out.

"Lizard?"

And as easily as that, as easily as the breath left his lungs, she had left the world.

"Lizard?"

"Yes. Sorry."

"This is—nothing like this has ever happened to me before. Was she—did you know her?"

"Only from the database." Words scrolling up the face of a cathode ray tube. Words that over the long nights had created, had disclosed, a set of attitudes, a sensibility. A unique individual. A human being. Gone now, eternally, like the words that had revealed her.

"I should get off the phone. They're going to call you, Lizard. The police. I gave them your number. I got it off the database—I hope that was all right?"

"Yes, of course. They had it already—I gave it to them."

"But I wanted to let you know."

"I appreciate that, Karen. I do. Thank you."

"Call me if I can do anything. Or leave me a message on the database."

"I will. Thank you."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

He hung up the phone, sat back.

He looked at the balloon glass. It was as empty as his heart.

More Calvados? No. He needed to stay alert. It would be a long night.

“O kay,” said the brusque voice of Sergeant Bradley, “let me see if I get this. You were like talking to Miss D’Amici on this database thing. Fancy Pants, she called herself, you said. Why Fancy Pants? What’s the idea there?”

“I don’t really know, sergeant. It was the handle she chose.”

“Handle? Like on a CB radio?”

“Exactly. The people on the simulator pick a handle. I couldn’t tell you why she picked Fancy Pants.”

“And your nickname was what?”

“Lizard.” It sounded silly, childish in his ears. “I’m an old man, sergeant. One of my few pleasures is lying out in the back yard, in the sunshine. Hence the name.”

"And what kind of work do you do? I need it for the report, see."

"I'm a freelance researcher."

"Uh-huh." Dismissive, perhaps even slightly contemptuous, as though Lizard had admitted to being a gigolo. If Lizard was to get information from the sergeant, he needed the man's respect.

"It's more a hobby than a career. Before I retired, I taught history at the University of New Mexico."

"A professor, like?"

"Precisely like." *Precisely* pronounced in his most professorial tone.

"And you go onto this database for what, exactly?"

"The database itself I use in my work, for information searches. The CB simulator I use as a form of relaxation, a way to talk to people all over the country. I'm not able to leave the house as often as I'd like."

"Why's that?"

"I'm handicapped, sergeant. I'm in a wheelchair." Pedally impaired, as he had mockingly described it to FANCY.

"Oh." And once again Lizard thought he heard in the man's voice that hint of dismissiveness.

A gimp. A cripp.

And possibly the sergeant had heard it as well, for he added gruffly, "That's too bad."

Forget your pride. Give away another small piece of your soul. You need this man and his knowledge.

"It happened a long time ago, sergeant. In Korea."

"The war there, you mean?"

"Yes."

There was a pause as the sergeant digested this. Then: "Had an uncle got killed in Korea. Place called the Chosin Reservoir."

"Yes. I was there."

"It was rough, they say."

"It was rough, yes."

Another pause. Then, the voice warmer now: "Okay, look, professor. You say you talked to this guy. The guy that killed her."

"That's right. Twice, in fact. Once while we were on the CB simulator and again, later, over the telephone."

"Anything special about his voice?"

"Not really. He spoke in a whisper."

"So you can't tell me anything about him, is that right?"

"Well, yes, I believe I can. I can tell you that he knows how to

use a computer. He recognized a dialogue from a database when he saw it onscreen. He realized that Miss D'Amici was connected to someone. And he knew how to maintain the connection, knew how to talk to me. And he was cool enough, collected enough, to do that."

"Lot of people know how to use a computer."

"I realize that, sergeant."

"Anything else?"

"Well, I think it's safe to say that this is an arrogant man, a man who believes himself to be above the law. And who feels he can flout it with impunity."

"You got that from what he told you on the database?"

"Yes, and from what Miss D'Amici said about him."

"Yeah, well, like I say, professor, I sure wish you'd of kept some kind of record of what she said."

"So do I, sergeant." And he could have, had he possessed the presence of mind: he could have pressed a single function key, at any time, and his communication software would have saved his entire conversation with FANCY on the computer's hard disk. But, useless old man that he was, scattered and muddled, he had neglected to do so. "But we also know, from what she said, that the man was someone with whom she worked."

"Yeah, but see, professor, we only got your word for that. I mean about the scam and the blackmail, what we talked about before. I'm not saying you're lying, naturally. I'm positive you're not, in fact. A guy like you. But see, that's what they call in a court of law your basic hearsay evidence, and it doesn't help us. And also it doesn't mean that this was the same guy, the one who killed her."

"But it couldn't have been anyone else."

"But we don't know that, see. Not for a fact. I mean, this could of been exactly what it looks like, this killing."

"And what does it look like?"

"Like she went to the door and opened it and the guy rushed in and took her out. Killed her. And then he looked around for money. Her purse is on the floor. Wallet's missing."

"Window dressing, sergeant. He's trying to throw you off the track. Is there a peephole in the doorway?"

"Nope. So it *could* of gone down the way it looks. Some freak, revved up on angel dust."

"Someone on angel dust wouldn't have talked to me on the computer. He wouldn't have called me back, later, to threaten me."

"Sure. Right. But like I say, we only got your word for that, professor. We got to convince a jury, and we need more."

"How was she killed, sergeant?"

The sergeant paused, as though coming to a decision. Finally he reached it. "He used a knife. He cut her up pretty bad. I don't think you want the details, professor."

"A knife."

"Yeah." And the official side of the sergeant felt obliged to add: "Not a gun, like you told everyone to report to us."

"Yes. I'm sorry about that, sergeant. It seemed important to get someone to her apartment."

"Sure. I understand that." Gracious once again, now that he'd delivered his veiled reprimand.

"Was she sexually assaulted?" Lizard asked him.

"Doesn't look like it. The medical report will let us know for sure. Anything else you can tell me about this guy, the one at the office?"

"He's ruthless, sergeant. And I believe that, in a way, he's enjoying himself. He thinks he's smarter than everyone else, and this is giving him a chance to prove it. It's a game to him."

"How d'you figure that?"

"From the way he sounded on the phone. The way he threatened me."

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't pay that any mind, I were you. Out there, Albuquerque, you're a long ways away."

"Yes. You're right, of course."

"You want, I can call up the Albuquerque P.D. Have them send a cruiser around, keep an eye out." A tempting offer. The sergeant added: "But, you ask me, it'd be a waste of time. He's not going out there. He leaves town, right away he points a finger at himself."

"Of course. No, I don't think you need to call them, sergeant. I'll be fine."

"What I figured." Clearly, the sergeant could expect no less from the Hero of Chosin Reservoir.

"What happens next?"

"We talk to the people in her office. We try to find this guy. You don't know where she worked, you said."

"No. She never told me."

"We'll find out. I'll get back to you later today, professor. Let you know what's going on."

"Thank you, sergeant. I'd appreciate that."

"One thing, if you don't mind me asking."

"What's that?"

"You say you taught history and all, at the university out there."

"That's right."

"You were a teacher before you went to Korea?"

"No. I attended U.N.M. afterward, and got my degree."

"In a wheelchair?"

"Well, sergeant, at the time, I couldn't afford an automobile."

The sergeant laughed. "Right. Right. Okay, professor. Thanks. Talk to you later."

Catwoman: So now what?

Lizard: I wait until I hear from Sgt. Bradley again.

FourWheel: What was your hit on Bradley? He seem okay to you?

Lizard: Yes. He's a good cop, I think.

Romeo12: I wish we could do something besides sit around like this.

FourWheel: Do something like what?

Romeo12: Anything.

Lizard, too, was restless.

After talking to Sergeant Bradley, Lizard had known he wouldn't be able to sleep. He had rolled the chair out into the back yard, where, hidden by the redwood fence that circled the small lot, he had undressed and lowered himself into the lap pool. Slowly, steadily, working the adrenaline and the tension free from his body, he had swum the length of the pool, up and down, up and down, again and again until his arms ached and his breath rasped. Then, muscles straining, he had pulled himself from the water and positioned himself back into the chair.

The night was clear but growing cool, and to keep off the chill, he had turned on the portable heater he kept by poolside. For nearly an hour he had sat there in the heater's pale orange glow, beneath the cold snickering stars. Sat there remembering FANCY, and remembering, too, the others in his life who had slipped off the edge of the world and disappeared. His parents. His brother.

Live long enough and death acquires a certain familiarity. A familiarity that breeds not contempt but weariness, gray and barren and bone-deep. He was tired, finally, of losing people. Live long enough and you lose them all.

He had thought his days of losing them were over. His friends were gone, his family was gone. Except for the users on the database, there was no one in his life, no one close. And he had somehow persuaded himself, unconsciously, that the users, masquerading behind their gaudy, often silly nicknames, were in a sense unreal. He had never seen them, never met them: they were merely words on a screen.

He was in his seventh decade, and his capacity for self-deception remained undiminished.

FANCY had been real. Leslie D'Amici. And now, like the rest, she was gone.

Foolish old man.

In the end he had dressed and returned to the computer. When he connected to the database, he found that over twenty messages awaited him. News of FANCY's death had flashed through the system; users from all over the country had tried to contact him. Some of the messages were irritating, tainted by that prurient, slightly feverish curiosity often spawned by catastrophe, phosphorescence glowing in a ghost ship's wake. But he knew that turning death into a circus, roadside carnage into an entertainment, was one way to diminish its awesomeness. And most of the messages were simple, unadorned expressions of sorrow: condolences. Lizard had been moved.

Romeo12, FourWheel, and Catwoman had been online again, and Lizard had gathered them together in private talk to thank them and to relate his conversation with Sergeant Bradley.

- Romeo12: If we knew where she worked, we could maybe break into their system and get to their records. I know a hacker who could do it. Then maybe we could find out who this guy was.
- FourWheel: Maybe their system can't be accessed remotely.
- Catwoman: Besides, it's illegal.
- FourWheel: So is murder.
- Catwoman: The police are doing what they can.
- FourWheel: But maybe that's not enough.

Lizard: I think Catwoman's right. I believe we should wait to see what Sergeant Bradley learns.

Romeo12: It's just that sitting around and waiting for someone else to do something drives me crazy.

Lizard: I sympathize, but I still think we should

CONNECTION TERMINATED

Lizard stared, disbelieving, at the screen.

His software was telling him that somehow he had lost contact with the database.

Impossible.

He picked up the telephone.

No dial tone.

He tapped the button once, twice, three times.

Nothing. The line was dead.

A storm had knocked down the telephone wires?

But even as he considered the possibility, Lizard knew that it was absurd. There was no storm. No wind, no rain. The air was still.

He knew what had happened.

The line had been cut. Outside his house.

He looked at his watch.

Eleven o'clock.

Impossible. The man couldn't have gotten here so quickly.

Yes, he could. Work it out. He kills FANCY at eight, New Mexico time. He calls Lizard at eight thirty. Possibly he's even on his way to the airport by then. He buys a seat on a nine o'clock flight to Albuquerque. How long would the flight take? An hour, an hour and a half. He's in town by ten, ten thirty. He rents a car, he buys a local map—he already knows the address, he's gotten it off the database. He drives here, he gets rid of Lizard, he drives back to the airport, catches a plane back to L.A. By tomorrow morning, when the police arrive at the office, he's waiting for them, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

Wonderful. And why not sit here for another half an hour, working it out.

While the killer, whoever he is, sneaks around the house until he finds a way in.

No. Not sneaking around the house. Probably he was watching

Lizard right now. Peering in through one of the windows. Waiting to see what Lizard would do.

Probably he was enjoying this.

Slowly, without looking around the room, trying to appear as calm as possible, Lizard reached forward and turned off the computer. Slowly he rolled the wheelchair back from the desk, turned it, rolled across the hardwood floor of the living room and onto the red Mexican tiles of the kitchen. The circuit breakers were in a small metal box attached to the wall on the right, beside the extension telephone. Lizard opened the box, flipped breakers off until the kitchen, the entire house, vanished into darkness.

He would realize now that Lizard knew he was here.

But in the darkness, in familiar territory, Lizard was at less of a disadvantage.

Silently he rolled the chair up to the counter next to the sink, silently he slid open a drawer, reached in, and, cautiously, slowly, he moved his hand over the kitchen tools inside. His fingers found the wide, sharp blade of the carving knife. Carefully he slid them down the blade, grasped the handle, eased the knife from the drawer. Setting it on his lap, he rolled across the room, toward the back door.

A mistake, he realized as soon as he got there. Outside the door there was only the pool and the back yard, fenced in, hidden from the neighbors. No way out. If he shouted for help, FANCY's killer would come for him, silence him. Watching their televisions, wrapped within their own lives, Lizard's neighbors would never hear. Out there, in the starlight, Lizard would be visible, vulnerable. Out there, Lizard would be trapped.

Move.

No. Wait. Listen.

He sat there, listening. Waiting.

He suddenly thought: the car.

FANCY's killer wouldn't want to leave any traces of his presence here. How could he rent a car without giving his name?

He gives them cash? A big cash deposit? But then they'd be sure to remember him. Everyone uses credit cards.

And so does he. He uses FANCY's credit card. Leslie's credit card. Her wallet was missing. The name Leslie fits a man or a woman.

He uses the card to buy the plane ticket, rent the car . . .

But the police. They'd check on her card, they'd notify the credit card company, someone would discover that he'd used it to pur-

chase a ticket. A round trip ticket. The police would be waiting for him at the airport when he returned.

No, they wouldn't. They couldn't know that she owned a credit card, precisely because her wallet was missing.

Receipts. Credit card receipts. They'd search her house, they'd find them. But when? Tomorrow? By then it would be too late. Too late for them, too late for Lizard.

The darkness was complete. Not a sound came from anywhere in the house. Lizard could hear only the faint rasp of his own breath. He could feel, against his chest, against his ears, the thumping of his heart.

Catwoman, Romeo12, FourWheel. They'd been speaking to Lizard on the database. Lizard's abrupt disappearance must have told them that something was wrong. They'd call the police. They *had* to call the police.

Lizard strained his ears, hoping for the sound of sirens.

Nothing. Utter silence.

Even if they called the police, the police wouldn't get here in time. Lizard suddenly found himself feeling absurdly petulant: Why me? Why is this maniac bothering with me?

Because he thinks you know who he is.

But I don't.

You told him you did.

He didn't believe me.

He's changed his mind.

Lizard shook his head, as much to clear it as to deny the logic of the argument. Petulance won't help. Self-pity won't help. *Think.*

What time was it?

He looked at his watch. In the darkness, he couldn't see its face.

But surely a great deal of time had passed? Ten minutes? Fifteen minutes?

Maybe there was no one out there at all. Maybe some freak accident *had* severed the phone lines. A car hitting the pole, a tree collapsing onto the lines. And Lizard was sitting here, cowering in the kitchen, for no good reason, making a complete fool of himself—

He heard it then. A faint tinkling of glass. From the bedroom, it sounded like. The bedroom window.

Lizard wheeled around in the chair, reached out for the back door, found the doorknob, twisted it, tore open the door. Quickly he rolled away from it, until he and the chair were hidden beside the refrigerator.

The killer comes in, sees the open door, goes out there to investigate. Lizard races around the refrigerator, escapes out through the kitchen, out through the living room, out the front door to safety.

It could work. It had to work.

And once outside? What then?

A neighbor's house, a passerby, anything. It *had* to work. He had no other option.

He waited.

Nothing.

He listened, his heart hammering.

Nothing.

And then, abruptly, a voice, hushed and amused, the same voice he had heard over the telephone: "*Lizard?*"

Lizard didn't move, didn't breathe.

A white light wobbled across the ceiling of the kitchen, then was gone.

Flashlight. He's got one of those pocket flashlights.

It was over. Impossible for him not to see Lizard.

"I know you're here, old man."

The light trembled at the ceiling once again, splashed across the white walls, brought the Mexican tiles up from darkness, the color now of blood.

Clutching at the knife, Lizard hid his right hand down along the side of the wheelchair.

The light moved closer, sweeping back and forth across the small room. And then, inescapable, inevitable, the beam swung toward Lizard, and then it was on him, full in his face, the lens of the flashlight only three or four feet away. He squinted, blinking, but he could see nothing beyond the light.

He heard then, once again, the low and rattling chuckle. "*Cat got your tongue, Lizard?*"

Whipping his arm up from the wheelchair, Lizard hurled the knife toward that bright, blinding light.

The light jumped and he heard a wounded squeal and then a wild, savage curse, and Lizard rammed his hands against the arm of the chair and thrust himself from it, flailing his arms, throwing himself at the flashlight and the man who held it.

He collided with a body, small and compact and powerful, heard a grunt, and the beam from the flashlight wheeled madly around the room, shadows leaping, twisting, and then Lizard heard the flashlight smash against the tiles and shatter as he and the other

slammed to the floor, Lizard's hands groping for the other's arms. In the blackness, he felt a cold swift pain arc along his ribs—some strangely detached portion of his mind recognized it as a knife, opening his flesh—and then he had each wrist caught within his clenched hands and he was pounding them, as hard as he could, at the tiles.

The man squirmed beneath him, lashing out his legs, ramming his knees at Lizard, but that was useless, Lizard had felt no pain there since Korea.

And then a wrist broke free and fingers clawed at Lizard's eyes and a red brilliance exploded through his brain and, terrified of blindness, a blindness that would shatter the fragile balance he had created in his life, the balance that *was* his life, he struck out with all his force at the man's head and felt the impact through his entire body and he rolled away and began scrambling toward the door, his hands and forearms slapping at the tiles, frantic, desperate to get away.

And then he was through the door, dragging his dead legs behind him, snaking forward with a kind of back-and-forth shuffle, frenzied, pathetic, ignominious, but at least, thank God, he was *out*. And then he understood that it was the wrong door, the door to the pool, to the enclosed back yard, to a cul-de-sac, to the end of all this.

A mountain landed on his back, air erupted from his lungs. The man was atop him, and his fingers were wrapped around Lizard's neck and they were squeezing. Lizard's heart was about to rupture, and that oddly detached portion of his mind wanted to explain to the man that this was all unnecessary, all this violence, so unnecessary, for in a few moments the heart would burst into fragments and the man's job would be done for him.

Perhaps it was this eerie pocket of detachment that told Lizard what it was he must do. His hands, hands that had lifted him into and out of the wheelchair for forty years, hands that had grown stronger through the years as his legs had grown more wasted and withered, those hands fumbled at the stranger's hands around his throat until they worked a finger free, and then Lizard bent the finger down and out and heard it snap. Above him, the man whined, and Lizard propelled himself up with his left hand, pitching the man off him, to the side. While the man was still unbalanced, Lizard rolled over and struck out at him, and the man lurched off the cement deck and toppled into the pool. Water splattered Lizard

as he wormed forward, found the electric heater atop its insulating mats of wicker and rubber, pounded a fist at its power switch, and then, with a swing of his hand, sent it flying off the mats into the pool.

A single quick flash, nothing dramatic. A rapid splattering in the pool, as though a child were clapping small giddy hands at its surface. No other sound. And, after a moment, not even that.

Lizard, panting, lay back against the damp cement. A minute passed, and then another, and then he could hear the sirens, off in the distance, coming closer.

Lizard: His name was Steven Peckingham. He was a vice president where FANCY worked, according to Bradley. He and another V.P., a guy named Peter Allbright, were ripping off the company. Allbright confessed this morning. Stealing was apparently okay, but it seems that he drew the line at murder. It's ironic, because FANCY was planning to go to Allbright to tell him about the scam.

Catwoman: So even if Peckingham had shut you up, Allbright would've given him away.

Lizard: Yes. Unless Peckingham was planning to take care of Allbright, too. Which is a possibility.

Catwoman: But if FANCY found some records showing that Peckingham was stealing, wouldn't the police find them also, when they checked?

Lizard: Maybe Peckingham planned to destroy the records. Maybe, if he planned to kill Allbright, he planned to make it look like a suicide. Maybe he planned to plant FANCY'S credit card, the one he used to get out here, on Allbright. It would've looked like Allbright was responsible for FANCY'S death, and for mine, and for scamming the company. And then, according to that scenario, Allbright killed himself, tortured by guilt.

Catwoman: But you can't know any of that for sure. You can't really know what Peckingham was thinking.

Lizard: No. I imagine we'll never know.

Catwoman: And why did Peckingham come after you? If you really HAD known his name, you could've given it to the cops already.

Lizard: Something else I don't know. Maybe he thought I'd be trying to blackmail him, like FANCY had.

Catwoman: Maybe he flipped out, after he killed FANCY.

Lizard: Maybe.

Catwoman: And what about you? You're sure you're okay?

Lizard: I'm fine.

Catwoman: When you went off-line like that, last night, I nearly died. I KNEW he was there. FourWheel and Romeo and I logged off and called the cops.

Lizard: I know. I appreciate that.

Catwoman: I still don't think you're telling me everything. You're really okay?

Lizard: I'm really okay.

Catwoman: Lizard, the newspapers this morning had a story about FANCY and they gave her mother's name, in Sacramento. I called her. There's going to be a service for her on Friday, here in L.A. I talked to Romeo and FourWheel and some other people on the database, and they'd all like to go. Would you like to come with us? I could meet you at the airport and take you into town. I have a van, so it wouldn't be any problem. And there's a spare room here; it's not elegant or anything, but it's okay. If you want to spend the night, I mean.

Catwoman: Lizard?

Catwoman: Hey, Lizard, I'm not talking about marriage or a one-night stand or anything. I wasn't coming on to you. I just wondered if you'd like to come with the rest of us to FANCY'S service. And I thought maybe you'd like to stay in town for a day or two.

Lizard took a drag from his cigarette, exhaled. He leaned over the keyboard. His back was stiff, muscles and ligaments bruised and torn.

Yes, he typed. *I'd like that.*

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the February issue.

The strategic location of Dyre Straits has been known since early historic times. The mighty Trikkel River is the only outlet for the products of several countries of the heartland. It empties into the Saliver Sea, which connects to the ocean (and world markets) through Dyre Straits.

The tiny kingdom of Xanda controls the west bank of the straits, the kingdom of Yumta controls the east bank, and the little kingdom of Zabia is situated on an island in the middle. The king of each maintains a fleet of two ships and exacts tribute from every vessel passing through. Exasperated with paying triple toll for every shipload, the countries of the heartland sent secret agents to urge each king to declare war on the other two. After all, the heartlanders reasoned, one toll would be much better than three.

Their subterfuge succeeded. Each greedy king declared war upon his rivals. Thus it came about that six ships, including the *Duv*, hoisted anchor and set forth to do battle. Each could be readily identified by the individual color of its sails. The war was on.

(1) In the opening encounter, one ship of Xanda engaged the ship of Captain Horsh, with the result that the ship with maroon sails sank the one with blue sails. The other ship of Xanda chased the *Burd* but did not get close enough to exchange fire.

(2) At the same time, the ship with pink sails fought with Captain Jakel, resulting in the destruction of the *Egul*.

(3) Shortly thereafter, Captain Grbil exchanged cannon fire with both the *Auck* and the ship with red sails. He was delighted to sink the vessel of Captain Ibeks (he'd never liked the man). The ship with gray sails had not yet been in battle, and already each kingdom was reduced to one ship afloat.

(4) The captain of the ship with orange sails spotted a raft and rescued his countryman, Captain Lynkz, whose vessel had gone down. He then did battle with the *Cokk*; neither combatant was from Yumta. In this encounter, the ship of Captain Katt was sunk.

(5) The survivor of the previous battle then proceeded to bombard and sink the *Fowel*. He still managed to sail his damaged ship safely to his home port, where he was hailed as the victor of the battle royale at Dyre Straits.

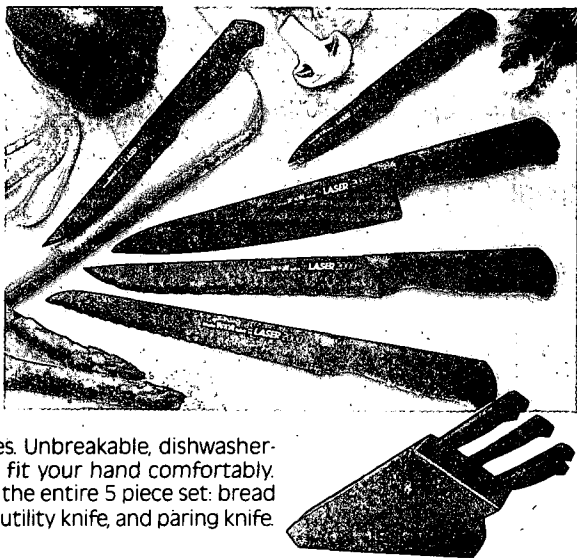
Which kingdom won?

See page 36 for the solution to the Mid-December puzzle.

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

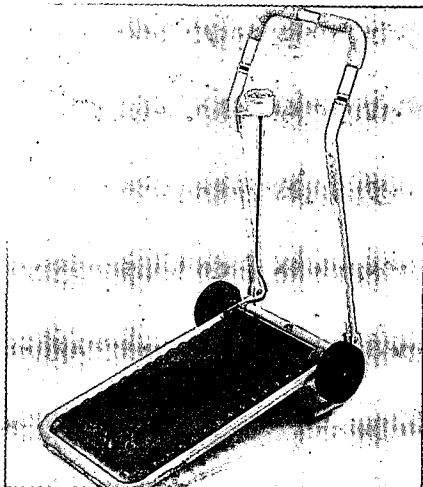
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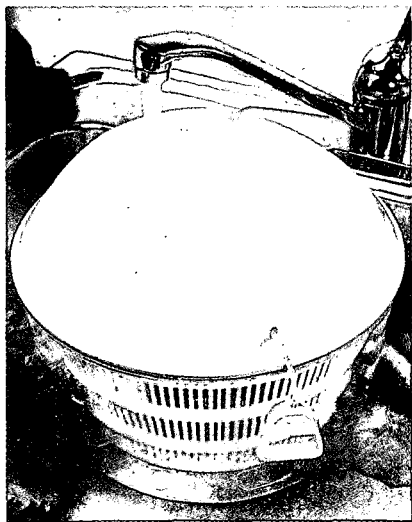


▼ FOOD FOR WOOD

Most of the convenience waxes you buy actually dry out wood instead of nourishing it. What's the alternative? Our choice is Williamsville Wax. It is made of beeswax and lemon oil, heat-blended with other natural oils. It can be used on any type of wood, any type of finish, on paneling or kitchen cabinets as well as fine furniture. Williamsville Wax is super for restoring neglected or mistreated wood. Two 8-oz. bottles cost **\$13.98** (\$3.25) #A14312.



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FICTION

Perils Before Swine

by Dan Crawford



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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The Middle European republic that calls itself the Associated States of Uralia is a small and uneasy union of three countries with boundaries that seem to have shifted with the seasons since late in the ninth century. A period of stability, known in some quarters as Red Domination, did nothing to encourage a faith in multinational governments. But the unplugging of the Communist melting pot had set them free in a confusing Europe, so the three tiny nations—Bohegan, Moraska, and Slovolina—had chosen to unite in the interest of survival until something better came along.

The capital was in Bohegan, of course; the big cities clustered there, and most of the career politicians who survived the change in governments were already there. Moraska and, farther east, Slovolina were simple, rolling lands filled with farms run by simple, rolling peasants. The people of Bohegan were unanimous in their praise of the farms; it was just the peasants that were completely hopeless. The Moraskans, for example, ran heavily to freckles, and tucked their hair through the hole at the back of their baseball caps, which had not been the fashion in Bohegan for years. Mo-

raskans were ungainly folk, too; the men were husky and the woman robust, to say the least. Bohegan valued sleeker, less bountiful women more in the Western style. The president of the Associated States, K. Zobidia Whitkovicha, was a prime example, patterning herself on an American First Lady of a previous generation.

President Whitkovicha lived in the Blue Mansion with her husband, H. Spenceslaus Whitkovech, and her dog Larney. Although the president and her husband were both reasonably popular, Larney was by far the most beloved member of the First Family. The two books he had written were instant best-sellers. (To be truthful, of course, Larney had done nothing of the kind, since dogs do not really write books. He'd dictated them.)

The country was as stable as was likely, given the usual push and pull of politics, and enjoyed a reasonable prosperity. This did irritate a few people who were not members of the president's political party, who were hoping for some crisis only they could solve. And it especially did not suit wicked old Trevadinka.

Trevadinka was a gaunt old man who lived alone in a forbidding castle just across the river from the capital city.

Once this castle had been the state prison, and Trevadinka its commandant. Both were remnants of the cold old, bad old days, yet everything Trevadinka had set up in the prison still worked, from the high-tech invisible forcefield that could surround the castle to the frigid cells below ground where complex but not really very interesting things could be done to political nonconformists.

Trevadinka had released all his prisoners—those who could still walk—when the old regime collapsed, and had allowed all the prison records—those that wouldn't burn—to be taken by the new government. In return (since no records remained to show that Trevadinka himself had done anything more than make tea for high-ranking prisoners), he was allowed to stay on as superintendent of the prison, to serve the new government. But what with one thing and another, the new government had never found a lot of use for the cold, cruel castle. Trevadinka had gone on living there for years, ignored and forgotten except by a few old grannies who told their grandchildren, "Now, be good, or the Trevadinka will get you."

The old man didn't like to have his wonderful prison ignored, so he had thought long

about ways to make use of his basic wickedness. It had become obvious to him early on that this new government, with its presidents and congresses and investigative eyewitness reports, was not his cup of tea at all. He would have to put an end to that first. So, after many years in solitude, reading up on the security systems at the Blue Mansion, where once his masters (and some of his eventual prisoners) had lived, he struck.

Slipping from the castle one moonless night, Trevadinka crossed the river and, bypassing all security systems, entered the Blue Mansion. Before Larney could make a sound, he had locked the dog up tight in a pet carrier, and carried his captive away, leaving behind a note. "If you wish to see the dog again," he had written, "the president must come to see Trevadinka."

"If she comes," he growled to Larney, once he had the dog safe inside the prison, "she will not leave, and the government will be lost without its president. If she does not come, the people will hate her for not going to help her darling doggy, and they may perhaps be convinced to overthrow her and the government as well."

"If I go," the president said next morning, in an emergency

meeting with her top three advisers, "I will not be allowed to leave again, and there will be a crisis. A crisis is not good for a government even in the best of times, and we have an election coming up. If I don't go, people will say I abandoned Larney, and that won't do us any good in the campaign."

The three advisors looked at her, and then at each other, as they made little clucking sounds indicating that they were deep in concentration. "An air strike," said her top advisor, who was also her husband, H. Spenceslaus Whitkovech. "Send in the Air Force."

"No," said the president's second advisor, an old school friend named J. Talboskaya Meningesa. She ran a hand through her hair and told the president, "Our missiles are old Russian models and won't be accurate enough; they'd damage at least the bridges across the river, and maybe some of the city on our side as well. Send in a special ground assault force to take the castle."

"That could work," said Jack Conroev, a young man not yet famous enough to have a first initial. "But they might accidentally hurt Larney. Let's negotiate. We could all go to see Trevadinka in your place. Or we could offer to be prisoners in exchange for Larney."

"But what would I do without my advisors?" the president demanded as the two older advisors gave Jack fiercely dirty looks. "I think you have the right idea, J. We'll send in the army."

The army was happy to be sent in, as it had had very little to do but guard the border for several years. The best regiment available suited up for the job, putting black grease under the eyes of every soldier, getting out the darkest camouflage gear, and providing escorts for every news team in the capital city. They advanced across the river, came within ten yards of the castle, and then stopped.

"Well, we're not going to get in from here," said General Ferapecka. "Get to it!"

"We don't seem to be able to," said a confused captain, rubbing his nose.

"Nonsense!" said the general. "You just . . ." Walking forward he smashed his nose against an invisible shield. Trevadinka had never had any excuse to use the forcefield before, so anyone who knew there was one in the old castle had forgotten. The general, irritated, ordered his troops to open fire. The bullets bounced off the shield, and about thirty soldiers were hit in the arms and legs.

"Only I know the secret of passing through the forcefield," Trevadinka called through a loudspeaker on the prison wall. "And I will not shut it off now until my demands are met. If the president comes to see me, I will let her pass, but nobody else."

As a matter of fact, the secret of passing through the forcefield was very simple: you had only to carry a white tennis ball in your hand. Trevadinka and the last premier of the old regime had agreed on this; it was absurdly simple but easy to control, since one could monitor the tennis balls imported from other lands. A number of high-ranking state officials had been issued white tennis balls, but the government had collapsed before they were told why. And, of course, no one wanted to be caught with one of these symbols of power once the old government was gone, so just about every white tennis ball in the country had been burned or buried.

There was, of course, one other person besides Trevadinka who knew the secret; the old premier. Unlike Trevadinka, he had simply scampered out of the city as soon as he realized his time was up, leaving behind all his keys, codes, and state documents. With only a small trunk of sou-

venirs—medals and such like—he had deported himself to Moraska. Among these backward peasants, he reasoned, no one would ever look for a man who had once owned fifty-three suits and seventeen briefcases, who had once had thirty telephones in his office.

At first he lived as a woodcutter, but from time to time he accidentally mentioned some things he knew about crops and pesticides until the peasants thought him a very well-informed man indeed. They made him a sort of forest sage, a wise man to be consulted (after one had given him some little present, a pie or a pound of bacon) on matters from the proper time to plant radishes to choice of a spouse. As the ex-premier was getting a little old to chop wood anyhow, he thought this was a very handy circumstance.

He did not especially like the way they came to him for predictions. Being peasants, and thus knowing no better, they believed in Moraska that the good God had given some men power to peer into the future. He became an honorary godparent at every christening for miles around, and had to gravely predict great things for the babies. Sometimes he would find a baby who amused him more than the others, in

the way it stuck its tongue out or bit his thumb, and he would predict even greater things. One or two of these predictions actually came true, which surprised him more than it did the peasants. It had been a long time since he had been a good Communist, but he did still think it was rather subversive of the good God to be giving any such powers to him, of all people.

Among the babies he had seen in his time was a girl baby christened Kunia Pistacque, one of the outlandish names they favored in Moraska, so much less stylish than the names in Bohegan. Her parents gave him a whole sheep to attend the christening, so he had gone so far as to predict that she would one day be a person of power in the capital. This was outlandish even for her parents, but to be on the safe side, they smiled at the ex-premier, who wasn't fooled for a moment. "Send her to me on her eighteenth birthday," he said; in the voice he had once used to read decrees to the nation, "and I will give her advice to help her along." He knew much that no one else knew; perhaps she would be able to use that knowledge to get a job in an office. Or perhaps they'd forget all about it.

They did not forget. Kunia's parents made sure she went to the village school every day, even when she was needed to help in the fields. As she got older, they bought her very nice clothes, in the belief that she could wear them when she went to the capital. (Complete waste of money: Moraskan children outgrow their clothes with great speed and tedious regularity.) And on her eighteenth birthday they sent her to the ex-premier's house with a basket of canned peaches.

"Oh," said the wise man, after Kunia had explained for the second time why she was there. In eighteen years, he'd let the whole incident slip his mind. "Um. I see. Er, yes. Well . . . did you see on your television that the president's dog has been kidnapped?"

"I did," Kunia replied, suspecting for a moment that he was trying to change the subject. "But I don't think Larney . . . oh! Do you mean I might be able to rescue him? The army couldn't."

"There are things armies can't do," said the ex-premier. "And I'd know. Wait here; I have something I could have given you years ago." He went into the house and brought out two white tennis balls.

Kunia was utterly mystified. "I can see how I could have used

them when I was little," she said. She tried to bounce one; after twenty years in a trunk it didn't bounce much. "Why didn't you give them to me then?"

The old man waved a hand. "You'd have lost them."

Kunia had always been careful with her toys. "I would not!" she protested.

He looked over his glasses at her. "Oh?"

Kunia remembered she was talking to someone who could see the future. "Oh." She tried to bounce the other ball. Then she stopped to pick them both up. "Are they magic, then? What am I going to do with them?"

The wise man winked at her. "You'll find out."

A ball in each hand, she shoved her fists onto her ample hips. "I believe that," she said. "But I was hoping to find out right now."

"I know you were," said the ex-premier. "But you'd better hurry if you want to get across the border before nightfall. And if you'll take the advice of an old man who knows what he's talking about, go right to the prison and don't stop to talk to the news teams."

Kunia thought about staying to ask more questions but decided that if the wise man was really wise she'd better do as

he suggested. If he wasn't wise, he'd most likely just stand here saying foolish things, so there was no point in staying. She set down the basket of peaches and went back home to tell her parents she was headed for Bohagan and the big city. After combing her hair and thrusting it through the back of her best baseball cap, she set off down the road. Trains move none too swiftly in Moraska, so she walked through the night, pausing only once for a few hours' sleep in a haystack. Her sturdy legs brought her to the prison at daybreak.

Bits of the army were still there, watching the castle for any sign that Trevadinka might decide to surrender, and the news teams were waiting tensely, as news teams are prone to do. One very tall man with immense black hair saw Kunia approaching and came running at her with a microphone. "Ah!" he cried, "Here comes a Slovolinan, probably a member of the evil commandant's kitchen staff. Miss, what can you tell us about the interior of Trevadinka's prison?"

"I've never been inside," Kunia told him. "I just came from Moraska to . . ."

But on learning she was not a kitchen worker at the prison, the man hurried past her to interview someone else. Kunia

shrugged and walked on toward the castle.

"Miss!" called a woman with a halo of golden hair. "Miss, what do people in the heartland of Slovolina make of these latest developments?"

"I'm from Moraska," Kunia told her. "What latest developments?"

But the woman had moved on, grumbling, "Stupid peasants! And they aren't even photogenic."

Kunia continued to approach the prison and passed a table where a number of generals had spread out maps and charts. "Oh!" said one, looking up. "Miss! People from Slovolina are supposed to be sly, aren't they? Do you have any old gypsy tricks for sneaking into a prison?"

Kunia was offended; she'd been brought up respectable. She walked on without answering. "Let the stupid peasant bump her nose, then," growled General Ferapecka.

Kunia was expecting to bump her nose. What did a man in Moraska, even a wise man, know about this kind of castle anyway? Still, she had her magic white tennis balls out, just in case he did know something.

A scanner in the castle wall noticed these and analyzed the size, composition, and color of

the tennis balls in a trifle more than half a second. Kunia stepped right through the invisible shield without knowing it.

"Hey!" shouted General Ferapecka, going after her. He didn't get far before he smashed his nose again.

Kunia heard the general shouting but didn't look back. She was in a hurry lest Treva-dinka look out a window. There was no telling what he might do to her if he saw her coming. What he'd do to her once she got there was something she could worry about later.

My, it was a big building. There were castles in Moraska, but Kunia had never visited any of them because she'd never gone far from her village. This building looked big enough to hold that whole village. How am I going to find one dog in all of this? she wondered.

Metal gates taller than any barn rose before her. She saw no doorbell or doorknob, so for lack of anything else to do, she put a shoulder against one and pushed. This would not have worked—it was a sliding gate—had not an electric eye noted the white tennis ball. Kunia stepped into the prison and stared.

A broad marble staircase seemed an odd thing to be sit-

ting just inside a prison gate. The deep red carpet wasn't precisely what she'd expected either. There was nothing else to see, so she started up the stairs. They were high, even for her, and a bit slippery.

Maybe I'm in the wrong castle, she thought. There could be two castles with invisible shields around them. Someone from Bohegan would have known about that.

What someone from Bohegan could have told her was that prisoners, as a rule, saw those stairs just once, on their way in. Most of Trevadinka's prison was cold metal and grey stone. And someone from Bohegan might have known that the safest thing to do at the top of the stairs was turn left.

But Kunia was from Moraska. She reached the top of the stairs and wasn't sure what to do. She stood in a long hall of red carpet and red wallpaper, and saw two doors. The door way off to her left was small and grey; the door ahead of her was a vast brown double door made of dark wood.

If I want to see the commandant, she said to herself, I suppose this is the quickest way. She stepped up to the big double doors and paused for a second to wonder whether she really wanted to see the commandant. Then, hefting the

white tennis balls that were her only weapon, she pushed through the doorway into the room beyond.

All the newspeople on her parents' television had gone on about what a grisly chamber of horrors Trevadinka's prison was. Kunia had expected old bones at least, and maybe a few heads on the floor. The floor had only carpet, red carpet even deeper and softer than that in the hall. The walls were paneled in dark brown. Every few feet along the wall there hung rich red draperies, and between these were highly polished tables bearing silver and ivory statues, or silver bowls of fresh fruit.

Being Moraskan, Kunia was perhaps immune to the more subtle forms of horror. In the bad old days, any number of prisoners from Bohegan had gone completely to pieces in Trevadinka's front office. The only thing Kunia was nervous about was that she probably didn't belong in any room so beautiful. She'd worn her heavy clothes, and was sort of sweaty from her long walk and then all those stairs. She took off her cap, smoothed her hair a bit, and put it back on.

Then, taking the white tennis balls from her pockets again, she moved toward the big brown desk, which was

massive enough to conceal an entire dragon. When no dragon materialized, she walked around the room, checking behind the drapes, stroking the shiny panels, and admiring the sheen of the little statues. Doors and windows were hidden behind the drapes, but Kunia had no notion of where she wanted to go from here. At length, she paused before a bowl of fruit, realizing she'd had no breakfast. She picked up a peach.

"Don't. It's poisoned."

Kunia whirled to find herself being considered by a dog with large brown eyes. Like anyone seeing a real celebrity in person for the first time, she immediately thought, Why, he looks like himself!

"Trevadinka only gives fruit to guests he doesn't like," the dog went on, ambling forward. "Are you supposed to be in here?"

"I... where did you come from?" Kunia demanded. "I was afraid you were the commandant coming in."

"He wouldn't be awake this early." Larney tipped his head to one side. "You're Moraskan, aren't you?"

Kunia smiled and dropped to her knees so as to talk to Larney face to face. "How could you tell?"

Larney smiled back. "You wear your baseball cap like a Moraskan. I don't get to meet a lot of Moraskans at the Blue Mansion. I thought they said you were all so fat."

Kunia shrugged. "I'm not so thin as those anchorwomen outside."

"Oh, don't let's talk about anchorwomen. I get so tired. . . ." His ears pricked up, and he rose on his hindlegs to put his forepaws on Kunia's shoulder. "Outside? I thought you must be the maid, or another prisoner. Did you come in from outside?"

"Yes, I did," she told him. "I..." She broke off at the sound of a high whine, like a pane of glass screaming.

Larney got back down on all fours. "That's his alarm clock. He mustn't catch you in here."

"Never mind me," Kunia told him. "Here. Take this magic tennis ball and run to the army."

She tried to push one of the tennis balls between his teeth, but Larney was looking back toward the drapes he'd come in past. "But if he finds you..."

Kunia started to crawl under the table that had the fruit bowl on top. "If somebody doesn't do something about the commandant, he can just hide inside his prison until he gets a chance to kidnap somebody

else. You go on, and I'll see what I can do."

"But you can't hide... I know I said you're not fat, but even a cat could see you poking out from under that table."

She knew he was right. "I'll find someplace else. But hurry! The president is in trouble as long as you're in here."

Larney could see the sense in that, so he bounded out past the big double doors. He wanted to wish his rescuer good luck, but he had a tennis ball in his mouth.

The sound of cheers soon told Kunia that Larney had made it to the soldiers and reporters outside. But the rattle of a door-knob told her something else. She rose and slid behind the drapes next to the table. What, she wondered, would the commandant look like? Would he be some flaming demon? The pictures on the news showed nothing more than a man, but they were so old they went back to when there was still a Wall in Berlin.

The drapes at the other side of the room rustled and admitted a tall man with a blue-grey uniform and a square, cold face. He did not look like a man who must be over seventy. Though he carried a cane, it was not for walking, since he swung it up to push the drapes from a window.

"What is all this noise?" he grumbled. "What are they... *Heska na Stola!* How did that dog..."

He swung around to study his office. His eyes fell on the drapes Kunia was behind, and his face went all sorrowful, like one of Kunia's schoolteachers while saying, "Now, you can do better than that, can't you?"

She knew she had to do something quickly, before he did, so she hurled her remaining tennis ball at him. Trevadinka didn't move; he caught the ball in his teeth and spat it on the floor.

"That's how you got in, is it?" said the commandant. "If that's the worst you can do to me..." He started forward.

Kunia had a feeling it actually was the worst she could do, so she tried it again while she tried to think of something worse. She let fly with a peach from the fruit bowl.

Trevadinka also caught this in his mouth, and spat it on the floor. But as he turned to come at Kunia again, his expression of scorn turned to one of surprise. Then he fell flat on his face.

The fruit, Kunia suddenly recalled, was poisoned. She stared for a moment at the commandant, once so powerful and now so still. It made her think.

And what she thought was, "Let me out of here."

She ran out the double doors, pausing only to scoop up her tennis ball. Nearly slipping on the stairs, she dashed right out of the prison and through the invisible forcefield.

Outside, Jack Conroev was leading Larney past the reporters to a waiting ambulance so the best veterinarians in Bohagan could look him over. The reporters were, of course, clustering around Larney trying to get a statement, while the general and his men were trying to find out how a dog could get through a forcefield when they had failed.

So only H. Spenceslaus Whitkovech and J. Talboskaya Meningesa saw the Moraskan woman come running out of the evil old castle.

"Look at that!" said H, nudging J.

"Quick, catch her!" said J.

The two advisors ran to meet her but stopped when she raised a white tennis ball as if ready to throw it. "Er, hello, dear," said H, speaking very slowly. "That was very heroic, very brave. Come with us, please."

Kunia lowered the tennis ball and pushed it into a pocket. "You're the president's husband, aren't you?" she said.

"That's right," said J. "He and I would like to take you to the Blue Mansion in this big car. Won't that be fun?"

Kunia had no idea why they were speaking to her as though she were four years old, but it had been a rather long night and morning. So she let them lead her to the car, where she sat in the back seat and closed her eyes.

"She must be the one the general saw go into the prison," H whispered to J.

"But the president can't be seen rewarding a Moraskan," J whispered back. "We have that key vote coming up in the legislature next week, and then the campaign. And the papers are already saying we've made too many concessions to the rural districts."

"Couldn't we dress her up or something?" asked H. "So no one could tell..."

"Are you joking?" J tapped her foot. "Just look at her! Look at those hips!"

"I'm looking."

"Look at her chest!"

"I'm looking."

"Look at her freckles!"

"Just a second."

"No one could mistake her for anything but a peasant girl," J declared. "We'll have to hire some actress to accept the medal. Larney won't have to know; we'll keep him in his

room, say he's too upset by his ordeal to make any public appearances."

H shrugged. "Okay, but what about her?"

J looked in through the window. "I know. We'll get her a job in the kitchen."

"That's a reward?"

J patted his hand. "A much nicer one than a medal and a big speech, I'm sure. She'd be terrified, poor little thing: a farm girl like that in front of a crowd."

The president's husband peered at Kunia. "Poor little . . ."

"Why, she's probably never seen more than ten people in one place at one time," J told him. "They like to work, these husky peasant girls, and she'll be happy in the kitchens, where there's plenty to eat and work she's used to. You wouldn't understand, being a man. You'll see."

The president's husband shrugged and got into the front seat. J got in as well and drove off.

Now, in fact, Kunia had not been asleep, but listening. She felt it was kind of a dirty trick that someone else should get the medal for what she did, but she was willing to wait and see what happened. H. Spenceslaus Whitkovech and J. Talboskaya Meningesa were people who

could be seen smiling in news reports nearly every day, so they must know what's right.

The wise man said I'd be important in the capital, she thought. Maybe he meant I'd be head cook at the Blue Mansion.

They drove around to the back entrance of the Blue Mansion so as not to get caught up in the traffic jam out front as people hurried to try to look at Larney. J. Talboskaya Meningesa took Kunia into the kitchen. "Here's, er, someone I know you'll make welcome," she told the kitchen staff. "She'll be a big help." Then she went away with H. Spenceslaus Whitkovech, for they had a lot of work to do.

"My name is . . ." Kunia started to say.

"*Tucnak!*" exclaimed a tall, grey-haired woman. "Another Moraskan!"

"That's all right, Baba," said a man with big glasses. "She doesn't have to know what a knife and fork are for to wash them."

"You're terrible," tittered an older woman, who handed Kunia a stained piece of cloth with laces. "This is an apron. You wear it over . . ."

"I know," Kunia told her, taking the old apron.

"Well, do you know where this goes, then?" demanded the man, snatching up a bar of soap

and reaching up to drop it down the front of her blouse.

"She is not here to play!" snapped the grey-haired woman.

Kunia dropped the apron to try to retrieve the soap. "Better put that on," the man told her. "We wouldn't want your clothes to get wet." He splashed some dirty water at her from a basin.

Kunia wondered if it would be a crime against the government to break the president's dishes over someone's head. While she was thinking this, the man pulled a big, teetering stack of dirty pans up next to the basin.

"You might get wet washing all these," he said, and tipped the pile up on top of the basin.

Basin, pots, and pans were tumbling around her, splashing water and gravy all over. "These Moraskans!" cried the grey-haired woman. "Clumsy as a cow!"

"Why not?" the man demanded. "She's built like a . . . fnord!" A soup ladle had been inserted into his mouth.

"That's enough of that, miss!" said the grey-haired woman, reaching in to take Kunia by the shoulder. But she stepped into a puddle of gravy and slid, grabbing another stack of pans and taking them down with her as she fell.

"Ai-yi-yi-yi-yi! What's going on here?"

A dark-haired man in a suit had entered the kitchen. Kunia recognized him from some news reports she'd seen. He was Jack Conroev, another one of the president's aides.

"There's a press conference today, so we'll need refreshments," he said, holding up a clipboard. "But maybe we'd better just order out."

The grey-haired woman got to her feet and hurried over to complain. Jack Conroev was a great favorite in the kitchen, for he often came down to find out about affairs in Slovolina, and to find out from talking to the staff what people in rural districts thought about things.

"They've foisted another Moraskan on us!" she cried, pointing at Kunia. "You know those people are completely unsuited for delicate work."

"Now, now," he said, patting her hands. "We're all playing on the same team, you know, no matter how we wear our caps." He smiled at Kunia. "What part of Moraska are you from, ma'am?"

Meanwhile, J. Talboskaya Meningesa and H. Spenceslaus Whitkovech were briefing the actress they'd hired. "You'll receive the medal," said H, "and then the media will start ask-

ing questions. You remember what you do?"

"Keep smiling and say nothing much," the actress replied. "I just did my duty and they'd better refer other questions to you, because I wouldn't want to endanger national security."

"Right," said J. "Go tell the president we're ready, H."

It was a fine ceremony, and the photographers kept their cameras flashing as the president awarded the actress the Order of St. Mazzuchelski. Then the media were allowed to ask their questions. These were not mere news reporters, but press corps people, who crushed up to the front of their enclosure as though it were feeding time at the zoo.

"What was Trevadinka like?"

"How did you find out how to get in?"

"What kind of deal did you have to make with the commandant?"

"How did you find Larney in such a big building?"

"General Ferapecka said he thought you were from Slovolina. Were you wearing a disguise?"

The actress smiled and passed all questions safely to the president or the president's aides until a tall man with eyes like twin dead fish called out, "We saw that Larney was car-

rying a white tennis ball, which was once the mark of the Communist Party elite. Has the president any comment on that?"

H and J looked at each other. They'd been so busy picking out a heroine who would look good on the news that they hadn't had time to think about that part of it.

"Er," said the president, glancing at her aides.

A woman with red hair like a helmet demanded, "Is it true, as the Conservative Loyalists are saying, that the president plans to institute some of the portions of the party's last Five Year Plan? Would this be a way of testing the waters?"

"No!" said J, pushing the actress to one side.

"Where, then, did Larney get the tennis ball?" demanded the first man. "Is Trevadinka part of some plan to distract the people from an inclination toward Socialist influences in the latest cabinet?"

"He probably just picked the tennis ball up in the prison," shouted H.

"Was Larney unaware, then, of the Communist implications of this tennis ball?" demanded the redhaired woman.

"Leaping graces!" the president explained. "That was twenty years ago!"

"Yes," agreed Jack Conroev, who had just come onto the platform. "How could you think the president's own dog would be plotting against our form of government?"

"Then why did he have a white tennis ball?" the man insisted.

"Ask him, why don't you?" Jack replied.

J and H glared at him, but he knew nothing about their plan to keep Larney off-camera. He hurried away and came back with Larney. The cameras really flashed now, and no one could ask any questions for some time; the applause and cheering at the sight of Larney, hale and hearty, were simply too much.

Finally, though, the question was put, and Larney answered it straightaway. "I gave the tennis ball to the chiefs of staff," he said. "And they've discovered that the forcefield is keyed to the old symbol of the Party elite; Trevadinka probably made it work that way. They should have Trevadinka himself locked up by now."

Well, now that Larney had explained things, everyone could see there was no plot against the government at all, and went back to taking pictures. "Can we get some with you and your rescuer?" called a photographer.

"Sure," said Larney. "Where is she?"

"I'm right here, Larney," said the actress.

"I can see that," he replied. "But where's the Moraskan woman who came into the prison and gave me the tennis ball?"

"You, er, just don't recognize her out of her, um, disguise," said H, winking at Larney.

Larney didn't quite catch the wink. "Well, if you are my rescuer, where's your tennis ball?" he demanded. "She had two, and mine's the only one the chiefs of staff had seen."

"Where is your tennis ball?" J demanded of the actress.

"The president can't give the Order of St. Mazzuchelski to an imposter!" exclaimed H. "We'll have to find the woman with the white tennis ball!"

Of course there was much excitement in the audience as the reporters shouted out new questions. People who had buried their own white tennis balls after the collapse of the old government hurried home to dig them up in hopes of claiming the medal. People who had burned their white tennis balls went out to get a drink.

Meanwhile, Kunia was in the kitchen, wiping her forehead. They had stopped teasing her, partly because Jack Conroev had told them to and

partly because there was a lot of work to do to feed and water the thundering herd of news-people. And because Kunia was the newest person in the kitchen, she got all the hardest work to do.

She found a little stool and sat down, taking out her magic tennis ball. "Are you sure this is what the wise man had in mind?" she asked it.

A hand reached over her shoulder and took hold of the ball. "I told you," said the grey-haired woman. "No lunch for us until three o'clock. How dare you steal that dumpling?"

"It's not a dumpling," Kunia protested. "It's a tennis ball!"

"Tennis ball!" snorted the woman, pulling it from Kunia's hand. "As if anyone ever heard of a white tennis ball!" She threw it on the ground. "If that's a tennis ball, it certainly bounces like a dumpling."

Kunia reached down to retrieve her ball, and the grey-haired woman reached for a wooden spoon to whack her with. Kunia saw this and, after kicking the little stool into the woman's legs, started to run.

"I never liked washing dishes anyhow," she muttered, not

paying a lot of attention to where she was going.

She spied a big crowd of people going in and out of a double doorway, and decided to hide there. Inside the big room, a dog was standing on a stage, saying, "I don't care what the general said. She was a Moraskan, a perfectly nice, clean Moraskan."

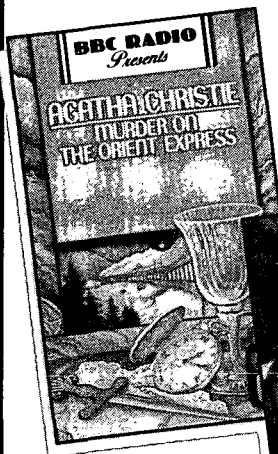
"Miss," said a soldier. "Miss, you can't come in here without a press pass. I'll have to ask you to . . ." Then he spotted the tennis ball in her hands and let out a holler.

Everyone turned to look. "There she is!" Larney shouted. "She's the one who really rescued me!"

Kunia saw no reason to deny this and soon found herself on the platform, where she was awarded the Order of St. Mazzuchelski. The president took back the stained apron and promoted her to work in the presidential information service. Kunia became very important at the Blue Mansion, working with Jack Conroev of the reelection campaign. She was a great deal of help in getting out the Moraskan vote, and even did some good work in Slovolina, where the people are *really* hopeless. (They wear their baseball caps backward.)

MURDER

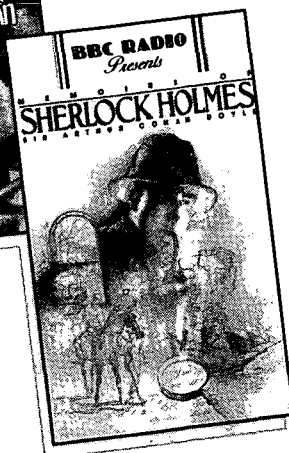
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FICTION

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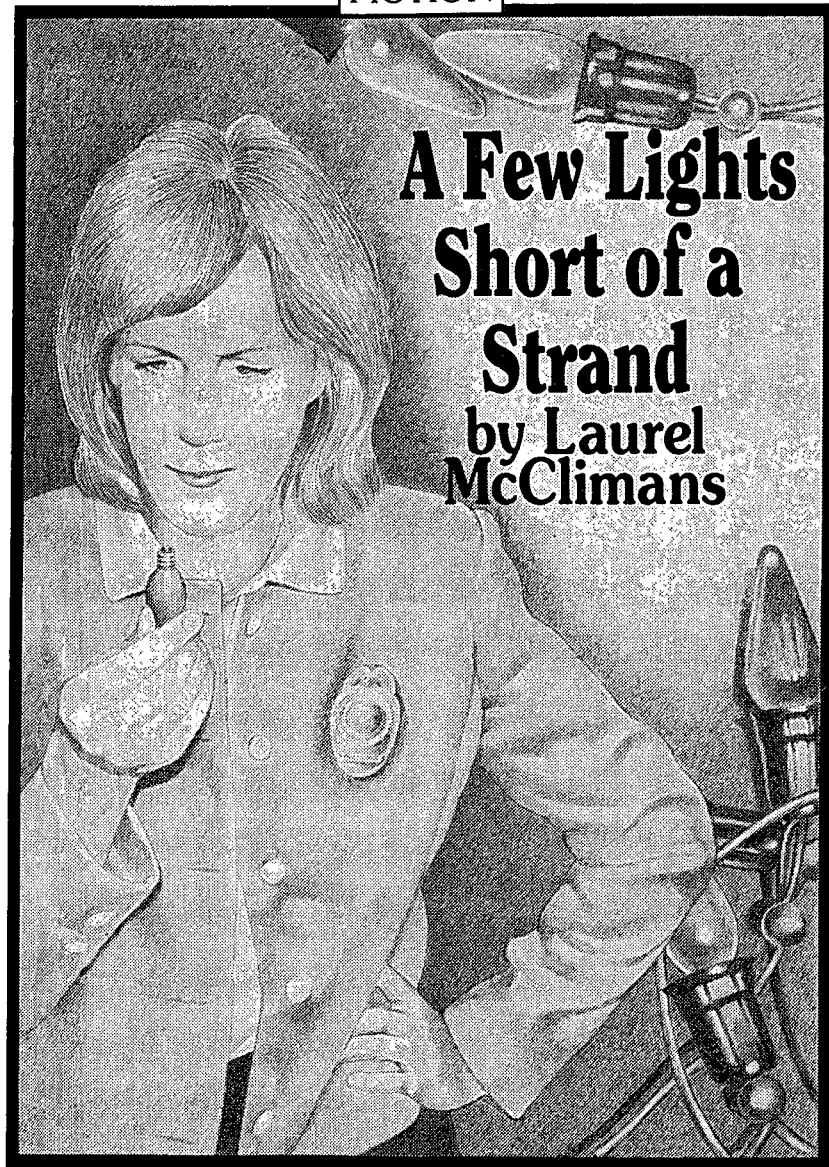


Illustration by Charles Demorat

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“Laugh if you want, Lacey. I don’t think it’s funny. And you won’t neither when I get enough signatures for your recall.”

“I’m not laughing, Earl. It’s just that the crimes being committed don’t measure up to all your fuss.”

With each word the volume of Earl’s voice increased. “First they stole the wreaths. Now they’re stealin’ wreaths *and* Christmas lights. Next they’ll be knockin’ over grocery stores!”

“Nobody’s going to knock over your grocery store, Earl.”

“How do you know they won’t?” Earl slapped both hands on my cluttered desk and leaned in until his nose was a foot from mine. “I’m here to inform you, missy. If one can of beans, if one bruised apple gets swiped from my store, I’m comin’ back here with the recall committee, and then you’re gonna be sorry you were ever elected chief of police.”

“Your tie’s in my tea.”

“What?”

“Your tie is in my tea.”

Earl looked down at his tie floating on top of my afternoon pick-me-up. As he stood, the tie dribbled dots of pekoe over my papers. While he blotted his tie with a hankie, he continued his tirade. “I was against havin’ a

woman as head cop of Duncleary when you were nominated. I was against it when you were elected. And I’m still against it. And don’t tell me to quit livin’ in the Dark Ages. This is 1964, not two thousand and three. Bein’ chief of police is a man’s job, for God’s sake. Always has been, always will be.” With that said, Earl Aubrey exited my office, still dabbing his tie.

Earl wasn’t the only one in Duncleary who thought I should never have been elected. A goodly number of men and an equal number of women felt the same. But I had won the thirty-seven votes, so there I sat, five weeks in office with my first crime wave.

Earl also hadn’t been alone in complaining about the theft of his outdoor Christmas decorations. By December tenth, fourteen complaints had been logged. Well, thirteen actually. Earl had been hit first at home, then at his store. I found that amusing.

But I also took it seriously. If I couldn’t crack something as simple as petty theft, I’d never gain the confidence of the town. No confidence meant no job.

And I needed my job. I was a twenty-six-year-old widow with two young kids, a high school education, and limited skills.

Besides the financial one, there was also an emotional reason why I wanted to be chief. I wanted to find the bastard who had killed my husband sixteen months before. The probability of accomplishing that was so remote it was laughable. At that time I needed to believe it was also possible.

Now to answer the question that's probably on your mind: how did a housewife, with no law enforcement credentials, get elected chief of police, especially in 1964.

It was *because* it was '64 that it happened. At that time the population of Duncleary, a town in the Big Bend area of north Florida, was less than three thousand. People knew me as well as they'd known my dad and husband. Dad had been the town's police chief for eighteen years; my husband was chief for seven years before his murder. The people of Duncleary knew my principles were the same as Dad's and Tommy's, which I'm sure is why the voters preferred me to the temporary chief the council had appointed, much to the surprise of many people. Today it could never happen.

The idea of Earl dragging his tie through my tea soured me on drinking the rest, so I told

my clerk if anybody wanted me, I'd be at Daisy's Cafe.

A light breeze ruffled my hair as I walked down First Street. Seventy degrees was again the predicted high, and the shopkeepers had their doors open to catch the last days of fall. As I passed Pichard's Bakery, the tantalizing aroma of freshly baked bread wafted to the sidewalk. Two doors down, at Carleen's Curldom, the stink of a permanent wave greeted me, along with Carleen, having a smoke.

"Afternoon, Lacey."

"Hey, Carleen."

"You find my Christmas lights yet?"

"Not yet."

"I got a two dollar bet with Annie Gates that you don't find none of 'em."

"Nice talking to you too, Carleen."

I crossed Pennsylvania Avenue and continued down First.

As I approached Daisy's, through the open doorway I heard raucous laughter only half-witted men in baseball caps can make. Before I could enter, Nathan Schneider emerged. Nathan lived across the street from me, and a gentler man I've never met. He and his wife Mary had moved down from Illinois six years before! Mary, who'd been raised in Duncleary, was welcomed

warmly. Sad to say, few of our good citizens were as receptive to Nathan. He was a Yankee, and in the sixties that still mattered to some. Even after Mary's death most of the town remained cold hearted towards him.

With a tip of his fedora Nathan said, "Afternoon, Lacey."

"Are those guys giving you a hard time again?"

"It's all right."

"No, it's not."

As he changed the subject, his face shifted into a smile. "Guess what I'm making for dinner?"

While the kids were in Monticello visiting Tommy's folks, Nathan had been cooking my supper.

"Corned beef, dumplings, and dill gravy," he said.

"Nathan, I'm going to look like Santa Claus by the time the kids get back."

"Good. We need to fatten you up."

After saying our goodbyes I entered Daisy's, your typical small town cafe. On one side a counter stretched the length of the diner. Booths lined the opposite wall. As usual, in the second booth from the front sat Beemer Cockrell, Tweed Staples, and Dix Aubrey, Earl's son. Beemer and Tweed were several years younger than I; Dix was about my age. Tweed

and Dix were high school graduates; Beemer dropped out after his sophomore year. He figured if he couldn't pass the tenth grade after three tries, maybe it wasn't meant to be. Beemer had always been a quick study.

After a punch in Tweed's ribs Beemer said, "Damn, Tweed. I don't know where you come up with your stuff. You're a real hoot."

"Old man Schneider's the hoot," Tweed said. "I think the guy's a couple bricks short of a load. Or how 'bout, he's a few lights short of a strand."

"Damn, Tweed. That's another one." Beemer had the laugh of a snorting bull. Still does. "You think that up all by yourself?"

"Yeah."

"In keepin' with the holiday? Or 'cause he don't—"

"Afternoon, chief."

I ignored Dix and started right in on the idiot to my left. "You know, Tweed. Anyone that goes around with his fly open half the time's got no room to talk about anybody."

Beemer's snort said my remark amused him.

"You're no prize either, Beemer."

"What's got you all riled, Lacey?"

"You, that's what. Nathan Schneider's a lonely old man

who's desperate for a friend, and all you flat-assers can do is make life miserable for him."

"Come on, Lacey, we was just havin' some fun. I mean, the guy is kinda strange. You know, he talks to himself."

"Maybe that's because there's nobody in town worth talking to."

"I still say he's strange."

"If you want to talk about strange, Beemer, go visit your relatives. I understand some of your cousins have a real fondness for one another. So what's it going to be? You going to leave Mr. Schneider alone?"

"I don't know. I guess."

I looked to Tweed for his answer.

"We're not doin' nothin' illegal."

"But you are going to stop, aren't you." I turned to Dix. "How about you?"

"You don't scare me. I give you two more weeks wearing that uniform, and then you're outa there. It's like my old man says. If God had wanted females to be cops, He would have given you badges 'stead of hooters."

I had a reply, but Daisy's was a family eatery so I simply warned them once more to leave Nathan alone.

As I walked through the open doorway, Beemer said, "Hey,

Tweed. Does havin' your fly open help you think better?"

It was frightening to know those three had the right to operate a motor vehicle. And to vote.

Since both father and son had squashed my desire for a cup of tea, I headed back to the office. The minute I set foot on the hardwood floor I learned another wreath and several more bulbs had been reported missing. I spent the rest of the afternoon trying to figure if the thefts formed a pattern.

By six o'clock I was ready for both Nathan's supper and company.

Since Mary's death a year before, Nathan, the kids, and I had shared many meals and much conversation. The kids looked upon Nathan as the grandpa they never knew. To me he was, and is, a cherished friend; a friend who helped make a difficult time—the aftermath of Tommy's murder—less frightening. During those months, in letters I still have, Nathan comforted me with words of common sense and love. I had no husband, no father, no mother. But I did have Nathan.

And he had us. And his job at the hardware store. After Mary's death he also worked at Earl's grocery, to help fill in the hours, he said. But I knew

Mary's medical bills were the reason. The last months had been expensive.

When I pulled into Sweetgum Drive, Nathan's house and yard glittered like magic in the darkness. The houses on Sweetgum were built in the thirties. White frame, two story, with wide porches on the front and garages in the back, they all looked alike, except at Christmas when Nathan strung his lights. Although the good citizens of Duncleary didn't care to socialize with Nathan, they did enjoy taking in his Christmas display. Every night from the first week of December to the day after New Year's, people on foot and in cars viewed what Nathan called his gift to the town.

Lights of red, green, and blue outlined Nathan's house. All the bushes, from the azaleas to the camellias to the three junipers at the corner of his property, were covered in white lights, to resemble snow. An angel usually sat atop the tallest juniper. That year a star stood in her place.

After changing into jeans and a sweater, I headed for Nathan's. Before I got to the street, I heard my side neighbor Mildred Popper singing "Jingle Bells" on her porch. Mildred and her husband went to school with my folks.

"Evenin', Mildred."

"Evenin', Lacey."

"Pretty, isn't it?" I said, referring to Nathan's yard.

"Surely is. And I swear each night it gets prettier."

"You told that to Nathan?"

"Heavens no. I never talk to him."

"Why not?"

"He's not one of us. I don't know how to talk to people that aren't one of us."

She made him sound like he was from Saturn. But I knew better than to argue, so I just said, "Hope you and George have a nice Christmas," and crossed the street to Nathan's.

Nathan greeted me with a hug.

"Mrs. Popper and I were just admiring your lights. She thinks they're pretty."

"How kind. Thank her for me, would you?"

"What happened to the angel?"

"Angel?"

"Scooter's angel. The one you always put on the juniper."

"I decided I needed a change this year. I hope he won't be disappointed." As he closed the door, he said, "Wait till you taste my gravy. It's never been better."

Several nights passed, and each morning a few more complaints came in about stolen bulbs and pilfered wreaths.

Even Mildred Popper called. "Why do you suppose somebody would steal four Christmas lights?"

I had absolutely no idea.

That night I got an early Christmas present. Ben Thomas, one of my officers, delivered it by phone.

"Chief, I thought you'd like to know. I just arrested some guys that have a likin' for Christmas goodies." I could have kissed him.

Somehow Earl got wind of the collar and was waiting for me at City Hall.

"I hear you caught the low-lifes that have been stealin' the Christmas stuff."

"The suspects were apprehended stealing Rudolph from Jimmy Culpepper's place."

"Well, I've come down to make sure you don't get mush-hearted and let the garbage go. I want the book thrown at them. You hear me, Lacey. I want the book."

I would have obliged, but unfortunately the three idiots had only committed petty theft.

Tweed, Beemer, and Dix had been caught trying to load Rudolph into the trunk of Tweed's Fairlane, so we had them solid on that charge. And when we searched their premises we found lots of wreaths. But nowhere did we find Christmas lights. They each swore on

their granddaddy's graves they hadn't stolen the bulbs. I thought they protested too much.

Even for those three, stealing Christmas decorations bordered on infantile. I asked why they did it.

With a smirk, and his fly open, Tweed said, "Because we wanted to show everybody what a sorry cop you are."

"It was Dix's idea," Beemer volunteered. "He said if you couldn't solve a case as easy as this, it showed you shouldn't be chief."

And maybe I shouldn't be. The idiots had been Ben's collar, not mine.

The next afternoon, when I came home for lunch, Mildred Popper yoo-hooed as I got out of the car.

"I do apologize," she said, trying to keep her black Labrador from greeting me, "but you know how Peppie is when she sees somethin' movin'. She just pounces. This was taped to your front door, sort of blowin' in the breeze. Hope it wasn't nothin' important."

Mildred handed me a slightly damp, torn piece of paper. When I got inside, I read the typed message.

"Dear Chief. Dix Aubrey, Beemer Cockrell, and Tweed Staples should not be charged for the recent theft of Christ-

mas lights. They are not guilty. I am."

The note could have been genuine. It also could have been from one of the idiots. I slipped it into an envelope and put it in my shirt pocket.

On the way back to the office, at Sweetgum and First, I saw two young boys toss something into Frenchy's Creek. I stopped to investigate.

Frenchy's Creek meanders through the south side of Dunclary, mostly behind and parallel to Sweetgum Drive. Its banks are fairly high, and its bed is about twenty feet wide, but I don't think I've ever seen more than three feet of water in it unless we get a frog-strangler of a rain. Some laurel oaks and a few river birches populate its course. Its romantic name came from a French émigré who was found floating face down in it one summer day in 1845.

I approached the bank where the kids had stood and looked into the creek. There, floating on the murky water, were several pages of homework, each with a big red D marked at the top. I had to smile, remembering the times when some of my homework ended up likewise.

As I scanned the area, a flattened beer can caught my eye. I retrieved it and another one,

farther up the stream, along with an empty cigarette pack.

I was about at Sixth Street when I first saw the little bits of colored something lying atop the fallen leaves. As I walked, the pieces became large enough that I could tell they were fragments of thin glass, the kind used in Christmas lights. Several yards up the creek, beside an oak, I found a handful of threaded ends. Jagged pieces of red, green, blue, and white were still attached. The trail continued on and on, right to Nathan's back fence. A scattered mound of broken colors and threaded ends lay to the right of the picket gate.

That night I sat in my darkened house and looked at Nathan's yard glittering with the colors I had seen that afternoon.

Why would the broken bulbs lead to Nathan's gate? Had he been stealing the lights, then breaking them? Was he tired of people admiring his "gift to the town" but not caring about him? Was this his way of getting back?

I looked to the corner where the three junipers stood. Always the tallest juniper had been adorned with an angel, a beautiful angel with flowing gown and blonde hair. Every year my son Scooter would say, "That's you up there, Mommy,"

as Nathan, with much fanfare, set the angel at the top of the shrub. That year, without any ceremony, an ordinary star had taken its place of honor.

As I stared at the star, a thought crept into my mind.

Maybe, just maybe, the lights weren't leading up to Nathan's gate. Maybe they were trailing from it.

Nathan kept his Christmas things in the shed at the back of his property. Maybe someone had broken into the shed, stolen the bulbs, and smashed them along the creek.

But who would do such a malicious, childish thing?

I didn't have to think twice.

But how could I prove it?

I probably couldn't, which upset me a lot more than thinking Nathan had been sneaking around town stealing people's lights to replace the ones that had been broken.

My one piece of evidence that could prove Nathan's guilt, or innocence, was in my pocket. I went into the bedroom. From a dresser drawer I pulled out my jewelry box. From the box I retrieved one of the letters Nathan wrote after Tommy's death. I remember he apologized for typing the letters, saying his handwriting was nearly illegible.

When I compared the typing from Nathan's letter and the

confession that Peppie had attacked, my heart sank. The partial *o* and crooked *a* in both made it clear they'd been typed on the same machine.

I hated this. But I couldn't disregard what had happened. I had sworn to uphold the law. No matter what Nathan had done for me personally, he had committed a crime against the town.

I had to confront him. If he were guilty, it wouldn't take long to find out. Dad used to say honest people are quick to own up; their consciences won't let them prolong the game.

As I got up my nerve to go across the street, Nathan came out of the house and got into his car. After backing out of the driveway, he headed east.

Since I hadn't been a police officer long enough to have a cop's instinct, it was my woman's intuition that told me to follow.

By the time I got outside, Nathan was gone. When I got to the "T" intersection at Tenth Street, both directions were void of traffic. I turned right. After four blocks of nothing I retraced my steps. With each passing block I got a sicker feeling as to where Nathan had headed. I stepped on the gas and prayed I was wrong.

As I rounded Jefferson, I heard the commotion before I

saw it. Dogs barked, people yelled, and suddenly a blast of light illuminated the middle of the block.

When I pulled up to Earl Aubrey's house, our local grocer had his shotgun in one hand and Nathan's arm in the other.

The minute Earl saw me he started shouting. "I caught him! I caught him guilty as sin! I knew some man would end up doin' your job."

"You okay, Nathan?"

"Hey! *I'm* the one that got robbed. And I want him locked up. You hear me, Lacey. I want him locked up!"

"Oh, Earl, shut up. And shut your damn dog up, too. And give me that gun."

Once Earl and his dog quieted, I again asked Nathan, "You okay?"

"Yes, I'm all right."

I smacked Earl's hand away from Nathan's arm. "Nathan, do you want to tell me why?"

"I'm sorry, Lacey. I didn't know what to do."

"Just tell me why you stole the lights."

He took off his hat and held it before him. As he spoke, he worked the band with his fingers. "About a month ago somebody broke into my shed and took nearly all my Christmas things. They only left me a few bulbs and the wires."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You'd just been elected, and it was such a little problem I didn't want to bother you. Looks like I ended up bothering you even more. I'm sorry."

"But why steal people's lights?"

"Every year I put some money aside so I can decorate my house for the holidays. The money's for the electricity I use. I hadn't counted on having to buy so many new bulbs. I had enough for either the electric bill or the lights, but not both. Since I needed the electricity, I decided the money I had saved would go for that and then I could borrow the light bulbs."

Earl said, "You mean steal."

"Oh, no. I wrote down every bulb I took," Nathan pulled a small notebook from his jacket pocket, "and where it belonged. I was going to return all the bulbs after Christmas. I didn't think anyone would mind. It was such a little thing."

"But why steal the bulbs at all?" I asked. "Why not just forget about decorating the house this year?"

"I hated to disappoint the town. Especially the kids."

Although arresting Nathan tore at my heart, it turned out to be that old cliched blessing in disguise.

When the town learned what Nathan had done and why, the good citizens of Duncleary ral-

lied to his support. Not only did they withdraw all complaints—even Earl—but they also began a collection for Nathan's December utility bill. Plus, every morning until Christmas, Nathan woke to find fruitcakes, cookies, even a smoked turkey on the porch, the town's way of saying both "welcome" and "we're sorry."

More people than ever viewed Nathan's display that year. And when someone came by whom Nathan had "borrowed" bulbs from, he took out his little notebook and showed which lights belonged to him or her. This gesture led Mildred Popper to suggest everyone bring back the same bulbs next Christmas. The idea spread, and a tradition began. Twelve years ago, because so many wanted to participate, the ceremony was moved from Nathan's yard to a little park north of town, with Nathan as guest of honor.

So now on December first, the people of Duncleary congregate for the lighting of the Christmas Park. Strands of lights are woven through the dogwood's delicate limbs, they rest atop the azaleas' evergreen leaves, they're wrapped about the junipers' boughs. As we all put our

bulbs on the strands, as we sing carols and watch each side of the park be illuminated, there's a great sense of community, of sharing. And it all began because people wanted to give of themselves, which is what Christmas is all about.

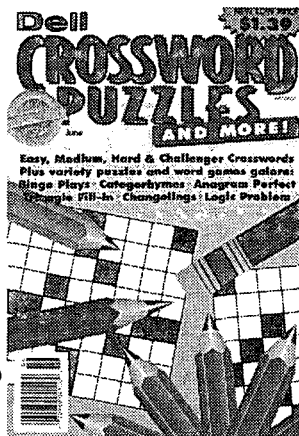
Nathan is now ninety and lives at the Magnolia Square Retirement Village. Although crippled with arthritis, every year, with a big smile, he flicks the switches that turn the little park into a piece of Duncleary magic.

And now, you'll have to excuse me. In a few minutes the lighting ceremony is scheduled to begin, and it would be inexcusable for the junior United States senator from Florida to be late.

I've been a senator for three terms, and my victories are now measured in landslides, not margins. It's wonderful to have that much respect and confidence from so many of my constituents. So many, except one. Every election Earl Aubrey lets me know he's voted for my male opponent. You see, Earl is still living in the Dark Ages, and it doesn't bother him at all that it's quickly approaching 2003.

But that's another story.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC



Gunman's Christmas

by Caddo Cameron

A. VOORST v. BEEST

Illustration by Andrea van Voorst van Beest

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Christmas is just four days away on my range, and for all I know, the guns of the law are even closer than that. Far and wide, marshals with posses at their backs are combing The Nations and boys with bounties on their scalps are a-huntin' their holes. They say there's five thousand wanted men in the Indian Territory this winter. Maybe so, but I'm interested in just one of 'em—me, *myself*—so I hit for my hideout in the breaks of the North Canadian and I don't throw off none until I get there. Why am I on the dodge? That's not a fair question in this country, mister, and besides—I ain't never been no hand to talk about my personal virtues and shortcomin's.

I located and built this here sanctuary myself. It's a half-dugout-and-log backed into the high side of a draw under tall trees and heavy brush so that my smoke can lose itself in the trees and my horses can take cover in the brush. Five ways out of the place if you know how to find 'em, and I do. There's an everlastin' spring in the draw and good feed for any horseflesh that I happen to be holdin' while it gets over its homesickness. Got plenty privacy here, too, and I like that, for I always trail alone. Company sorta spooks me, makes my gunhand plumb skittish. I'll admit that I ain't got much of a spread here on the Canadian, but it's home to a man who don't want a home until he gets to needin' a home powerful bad, a quiet place to rest up or patch up in; and sometimes a fella has to cache a bankroll until it cools down to where it ain't too hot to handle. Fact is, I seen the time when—but I ain't no hand to talk much.

Pretty soon day-after-tomorrow is Christmas—not that Christmas means anything to a man like me, but a fella will get to thinkin' about company and such round Christmastime—and I'm up on the bluff in a clump of dead jimsonweeds about the color of my clothes where I spend more or less time when the law is on the loose, and I've got my spyglass. I'm a-lookin' for company. I don't want no company. After a while I spot a band of riders a-joggin' up my side of the river, and before long my glass tells me that the man a-pointin' that bunch is Marshal Heck Henderson. He knows me, Heck does, knows the taste of my gunsmoke and the feel of my lead. He don't like me much. But Heck carries his posse right on by me, and I watch 'em until they're out of sight upriver and then I breathe easy like. Reckon he ain't lookin' for me in this part of the country. So I go to figgerin' that this ought to be a right quiet and peaceable Christmas for me. No company.

I'm fixin' to climb down and go and mix me a batch of bread when I swing my glass around for a last look. Yonder comes another rider! He's a-trailin' the posse or I miss my guess, and he's mighty careful to stay out of sight of 'em. When he comes close enough, I see that I don't know him, and from his looks I don't want to know the cuss nohow; but there *is somethin'* about him that makes me think I'd ought to know him. Imagination, I reckon. He keeps on a-ramblin' until I lose sight of him at the bend, so I'm kind of easy in my mind again. Probably no company.

On the way down the bluff I think maybe I'd ought to go to the turkey roost this evenin' and knock off a fat gobbler for my Christmas dinner. After all, Christmas is—well, it's Christmas. Or maybe I'd better fetch in *two* fat gobblers. With the country gettin' crowded thisaways, I *might* have company for Christmas.

Marshal Heck Henderson says that the devil gave me cat eyes and wolf ears, but he's wrong about that. Of course, most any man can train himself to pick up and recognize, without thinkin', all the everyday sounds and movements around him, and if he's a hair-trigger cuss any sound or motion that don't belong there will touch him off. I'm thataway, but I don't see and hear everything regardless of what Heck says. Like now—it's comin' dusk and I'm back in camp, out by the woodpile a-drawin' my turkeys, and the breeze is a-whisperin' through the naked trees and brush and a-rustlin' dead leaves and grass and an old coyote is a-tunin' up over on the bluff and I hear my horses feedin' down on the spring branch, and a fool cottontail goes a-skitterin' past and a twig pops like they do when it's frosty, then in the back of my brain somewhere I realize that *it ain't that cold now*—

And when I come to, I'm facin' the other way with a turkey in my left hand and a gun in my right, and it's a-pointin' dead center at a man's belly! My thumb is slippin' the hammer. I barely catch it in time.

He folds his arms slow and cautiouslike. His mouth is wide, and his teeth look white in his thin, dark face. He ain't makin' a sound, but he's laughin' at me!

I'm mad and I'm ashamed because he caught me nappin' thisaway, maybe more ashamed than mad, but I don't let on.

"You're a damned fool, stranger," I tell him.

He nods. "I know it. But when I got close enough to get a look at you, I knew who you were. I've heard of you. I wanted to see

your draw. I'm interested in gunplay. I'll give you ten dollars to do it again."

"Go to hell." I put away my Colt. "Gunslingin' ain't my business."

"But it *is* mine, or rather my hobby." He grins and unfolds his arms plumb careful. "Hate to admit it, but I think I can learn something from you. I'll make it twenty if you'll do that again."

"As I was sayin', stranger, you can go clean to hell, and I hope you have to walk every foot of the way."

He looks sorta hurt, if a face as mean as his can show hurt. Knowin' that he could have made a sieve out of my hide before I heard him, maybe I ain't got no call to be so cussed; but by now I've figured out who he is and, what I mean, I'd rather wake up and find a rattler in my blankets than to turn around and find that breed killer in my camp. He's half Indian—which nobody holds against him, of course—and he goes by the name of Choctaw. I've heard many a story about his doin's, and I never hear a man say a good word for him. Far as I know, he ain't got a friend in the world. Men who would stand up and shoot it out with the devil himself are afraid of Choctaw, or at least they cut a circle around him rather than to face him because they never can tell when he'll burn a man down just to add another notch to his gun. Law officers are his favorite game, and he cuts bigger notches for them, tallyin' twelve of 'em, I hear. Choctaw is more or less a mystery. They say he don't drink or carouse none, he's got education and talks language, and he reads books when he ain't too busy dodgin' the law or a-huntin' it down.

For a short spell now he don't say nothin'. Just stands there tall and wiry in his moccasins, sorta on the balls of his feet like a man fixed to jump in any direction, meanwhile lookin' me and my camp over good. I've had *my* say. I keep my mouth shut and my eyes open, and he can't so much as bat a winker without me catchin' him at it. I've done picked the spot where I'll let him have it—about twelve inches above where his gunbelts cross.

Pretty soon, he says, "I like this place."

"Too bad. I'm here first. How did you ever find it."

He grins. Puts me in mind of a mad dog tryin' to be friendly. "I'm half Indian, half white. The Indian's eyes found your cleverly hidden trail, and the white man's hunger for the society of his breed brought me here. Christmas, you know, and white men need company at Christmas."

I'll gamble he's a liar, but I don't say so. I tell him, "You were trailin' Heck Henderson's posse. Were you a-huntin' company then, or layin' for a chance to earn another credit?"

He's the damndest fella to laugh without makin' a sound. "Won't deny that I'd like to notch my gun for Henderson, but I didn't know that was his posse until I trailed them to their camp northwest of here. Picked up the tracks this morning. I knew they were white men's horses and white men riding them. I followed them because I wanted the company of white men. Christmas, you know."

Comin' out of a face like his, Choctaw's voice is plumb surprisin'—low, soft, and easy listenin'. And I'm a-talkin' to him more than I usually talk. Before today I ain't spoke to a man for close onto a month, and then I didn't have much to say. Just "Stick 'em up!" as I recollect it.

So I tell this breed killer, "Christmas, hell! Who wants company for Christmas?"

He don't turn a hair. He says right out, "You do. You were a boy not *too* long ago. You've remembered that today. You've been thinking of Christmas today. You want company for Christmas, but you won't admit it even to yourself. I'm here. Do I stay?"

"Go fetch up your horse."

Choctaw is a right handy man around camp, and he does his share of the chores outside. He talks a blue streak all the time about this and that and everything like a fella will when he's a-bustin' to talk. I never let him get behind me. To be fair and square about it, though, he don't try to. In fact, he seems to be takin' care not to, as if he thought my back was more dangerous than the front of me. He's a plumb peculiar cuss, Choctaw is. When we're goin' into the dugout, I hold back the buffalo robe door and nod for him to go ahead.

Carryin' his blanket roll, saddlebags, and rifle scabbard, he grins and makes a move to put 'em down. "It isn't polite for a guest to go armed into his host's house. Want me to take off my belts?"

"Hell, no, man! If I ain't got no better sense than to sleep with a rattler, damned if I'll make him shed his fangs."

Choctaw laughed at that, laughed out loud for the first time since he come. Then he sobers up and tells me right serious, "I've got a confession to make before I accept your hospitality. There was—"

"No need to confess your sins to me, mister. Go and hunt you up a parson."

He grins, and goes on, "Got to do it. There was a man spying on Henderson's camp while I was there. He must have seen me, too, because he followed me when I left. I made no effort to foul my trail. He may show up down here, then you'll have more company. Thought I'd ought to tell you."

I'll never know why I didn't get mad about that. I just ask him, "Why did you make sign right into my place thataway?"

"Didn't know whether I'd find anybody down here, and I wanted to make sure of company for Christmas."

I motion for him to go in. "Drop your beddin' on a bunk. Got four of 'em. Don't know why I ever put 'em in."

"You knew that you'd get lonesome, that's why."

By now I think I've figured this gunslinger out. He's got a twist in his head. He really does want to be with folks at Christmas, and he's a-fightin' down the temptation to kill. If it wasn't for Christmas, I'll gamble that he'd have made a play against me before this. Men like Choctaw will ride miles to test their gunplay with a man if he's got a bigger reputation as a gunsharp, or if they're nursin' a suspicion that he's faster than they are. They'll risk their lives to prove that he ain't. They're plumb loco thataway. I never did believe in such foolishness.

My six-shooters are tools that I use in my work, and the least I have to use the things, the better I'm satisfied.

Me and Choctaw have finished our supper, and we're a-playin' the coffeepot. All of a sudden he stops with a tin cup halfway to his mouth and I'm a-standin' there pourin' coffee onto the table instead of into my cup. We hear a man singin'. He's down the draw a piece and he ain't a-singin' very loud, but his voice carries high, clear, and sharp on the frosty air. I blow out the light, set down the pot, and we both head for the door.

The moon is up full, and it's good shootin' light.

We hunker down in a shadow and listen to the singin' as it comes closer and closer, slowlike up the draw.

Pretty soon, I allow, "That there pilgrim ain't as big a fool as you are."

Choctaw laughs a little. "But he can sing and I can't." He cocks an ear for a minute. "If he's the man I think he is, he's an even bigger fool than I am."

"Can't hardly believe it."

Far's I'm concerned, I can listen to that brand of singin' from now on. It's a new song that everybody is hummin' and whistlin' up and down the range, and I hear that a crazy buffalo hunter made it up a short time back. It starts off like this:

*I love these wild flowers, in this fair land of ours,
I love to hear the wild curlew scream
On the cliffs of white rock, where the antelope flock,
To graze on the herbage so green.
O, give me a home, where the buffalo roam,
Where the deer and the antelope play,
Where seldom is heard a discouragin' word
And the sky is not cloudy all day.*

After a little while, Choctaw says, "He's the man, all right."

With this the breed stands up, stretches himself, and tries his guns in their leather. I don't like the set of his head, sorta stickin' out at the end of his neck like a wolf a-testin' the air, and I don't like anything about him right now. Temptation is fixin' to get the best of him, Christmas regardless.

So I tell him quietlike, "Looky here, mister. Start trouble and you make yourself short in this here camp."

That woke him up. He grins quick, and says right gentle, "Mighty sorry. I once saw that man in action, and ever since then I've been wanting to meet up with him. Sorry I almost forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"Christmas, you know."

The stranger sings his way right up to the door. There he stops, folds his hands on his saddle horn and grins down at us. His hat is a-ridin' the back of his head, and the moon holds his face up for us to see plain as day, and right off I like that face. Shore, it's reckless and full of the devil to boot, but it ain't a bad face as faces go in this country. Looks so doggoned young, I betcha the fellas call him "Baby Face" when they know him well enough.

There's a laughter in his voice, "Merry Christmas, folks!"

"Christmas ain't hit these parts yet, stranger," I tell him, "but light and cool 'the seat of your britches until it does."

I ain't hardly got the words out of my mouth before he leaves the saddle as if he's afraid I'll change my mind a split second later and he wants to beat me to it. He's plumb cat on his feet, and his

eyes don't miss nothin' either. They sorta stumble when they brush against Choctaw, but the stranger don't say anything and he's quick to put out his hand to me.

"Mighty glad to take you at your word, mister," he says, happylike. "I've been huntin' company for Christmas, wantin' it bad. Call me—call me Kansas and let it go at that."

Kansas don't offer to shed his belts when he has put up his horse and goes to pack his trunk inside, and I see that he don't ever show his back to Choctaw. But that don't seem to spoil his fun, though. He eats like a man that's hungry for food and he talks like a man that's starved for talk, and he eats and talks and laughs and carries on until he has me and Choctaw a laughin', too. I can see that Kansas is one of them salty young devils that is likely to make any kind of a fool play whenever the notion strikes him, but right now he swears he's a-fixin' to celebrate Christmas and I believe him. The breed is a-behavin' himself decent now. Funny what Christmas does to some men.

Time slides past at a high trot with Kansas a-whoopin' it up thataway, and I don't know how long it is before I hear somethin' outside. Like always, I been keepin' one ear inside and the other ear outside. With the outside ear I'm a-listenin' to Henry Clay and his woman makin' sweet talk in that tall maple over the woodpile, Old Henry bein' a barred owl mighty nigh as big as a turkey, and when their talk stops suddenlike, I know somethin' or other is a-snoopin' round the draw.

So I says cautious to the boys, "Keep up the racket, I'm goin' to scout the camp."

Choctaw holds up a blanket to cut down the light, and I slip through the door. I Injun down in the brush by the trail and listen, and shore enough—somethin' is a-movin' my way and I'll swear it's a-walkin' on its hind legs. It ain't long before he shows up and stops ten feet away, lookin' hard at the dugout and a-listenin' just as hard, I reckon. I don't show myself first off because if he's got set triggers and explodes at sight of me, I might have to gun the cuss.

So I lay low in the brush, and tell him pleasantlike, "Stranger, if you're lookin' for somebody and want to live to find 'em, better stick your fingers in your ears and keep 'em stuck."

He does, quick. He don't so much as twitch his hide either, so I figure he's been ridin' his feelin's with a powerful tight rein for a long time, or he's made out of stuff that ain't got no feelin's. I walk

out while he's standin' there thataway.

He says, "Howdy, mister. Have I drifted into someplace where I ain't got no business to be?"

"That all depends," I tell him. "All depends on who you are and what you want. Drop your hands if you're a mind to."

"Much obliged," he sorta drawls, humorouslike. "Comin' from a man past thirty years old, I know it sounds plumb childish to say that I'm huntin' a good place to spend my Christmas, but I am."

What the hell? I think. Another one!

He goes on, "I ran smack onto a posse up yonder a ways, but they didn't see me. I ain't hankerin' to Christmas with a posse, but I did take time to look 'em over and kind of wonder whether any of 'em would know me if I moseyed into their camp. While I'm watchin' 'em, I see two other fellas doin' the same thing. After a while they left, one followin' the other, so I lit out and trailed 'em to this draw before it got too dark to read sign. I've been hidin' down below until I figured it was safe to go up to your house and see if I could hear somethin'. In times like these a man has to make shore, don't he?"

I nod.

He grins sheepish. His face is like a brown sandstone rock, but he can grin. He winds up, "I hate like blazes to spend Christmas alone on the prairie with coyotes and wolves and buffalo and the Spanish pony I'm ridin'. They're mighty poor company."

"Maybe so," I tell him, "but they're a damned sight gentler than the company you'll find here, Mr. —er—"

"Offhand, Arkansaw is the best name I can think of."

"It'll do."

"Do to hang with, you mean," he says, chucklin' down low somewhere.

"Go and fetch your pony."

He nods a "thank you," pleased as a pig in a punkin' patch, and moves off—big, but light on his feet like a bear.

I keep a eye on him and I'm thinkin', yonder goes a *good* man who'd be a *bad* man to monkey with.

Arkansaw fits into my Christmas company all right. He's a good feeder, likes his coffee hot and black, and he talks fit to kill same as the other fellas do when they first come. Kansas and him warm up to each other right from the start. He's plumb sociable to me and Choctaw, too, but I can see that he ain't lettin' the breed out

of his sight none to speak of. Fact is, all three of us are thataway about Choctaw. It ain't because he isn't all white, either. Men like us who are damned by society and hunted by the law don't ever get uppity about our color. We don't judge a man by the blood he was borned with. We measure him by the blood he's got in his veins *now*, 'cause we figure he made it whatever it is—good or bad. The trouble with Choctaw is, he don't use his guns to save his own hide, like most of us long riders do. He kills for the fun of it, and he's proud to notch credits on his gun. Far as we're concerned, *that's* what makes his blood smell of sulphur.

But, aside from keepin' a sharp eye on the cuss, we treat Choctaw as if he'd never done anything more than to stick up a bank or a stage or a army paymaster or lift a band of horses or clean out a gamblin' joint and swap lead with the law while makin' his get-away. In other words, we treat him like he's one of us. I'll say this for him, too: he's a-fightin' that old temptation to show the world and himself how good he is, and to earn credits. Christmas, I reckon. Time and again I see him a-studyin' how Kansas and Arkansas pack their weapons and handle themselves generally, and more'n once I feel his eyes on me. I can stand big cold, but when I feel Choctaw's eyes on me thataway, my backbone freezes solid.

My pillows are stuffed with buffalo hair and my bunks are filled with soft buffalo grass and everybody has plenty of blankets, but I betcha nobody gets much sleep that night unless Kansas does. I know I don't. Every time a man moves or even draws a long breath, that dead grass whispers a warnin' that sounds mighty loud in a dugout full of hair-trigger men who don't trust nobody. Kansas might have done some sleepin', though, 'cause he's the take-it-as-it-comes kind. Anyhow, he's the first man in his boots in the mornin', and he choruses the balance of us out of our blankets at the break of day, a-raisin' hell like a frisky colt, and he stirs up the fire and puts on a chunk and takes the coffeepot out of the ashes and fills our cups, and he reminds us that it's Christmas Eve and Santa Claus is no doubt a-whackin' his eight-deer hitch down the Northern Trail already.

"I figure he'll hit The Nations about two minutes before midnight," allows Kansas, "unless he gets caught up in a Nebraska blizzard."

"Huh!" I grunt. "He'd better stay clean away from The Nations. Betcha there's a warrant out for him and a posse on his tail before

he's been in this country a hour."

"And you ain't talkin'," declared Arkansaw. "The marshals will corral him, and they'll feed his deer to the reservation Indians and they'll take him to Fort Smith and Judge Parker will hang Old Santa there."

Choctaw spins the cylinder of his right-hand gun, maybe to make certain that nobody ain't unloaded it during the night. He grins across at us and says, "Maybe Old Santa will give Judge Parker the slip. I have, twice. That hanging murderer has been trying to get his bloody paws on me for years. Some day I'll file a notch for him, a big notch."

Ordinarily men like us could talk all day about the Hangin' Judge and what we'd like to do to him, but somehow or other he ain't interestin' subject on Christmas Eve. Nobody taken up where Choctaw left off. Kansas allows that we'd ought to have a big feed tomorrow, Christmas, so right after breakfast I set the boys off to do some work while I go up the bluff with my spyglass, to look the scenery over. With a posse a-nosin' round, it don't pay to get careless. The guns of the law don't take Christmas off.

Everything looks natural, not a soul in sight from the bluff. All of a sudden it comes to me like that Old Heck and his deputies are probably huntin' the trail of that fella that stuck up that English lord and his guide and two flunkies a short time back. That happened more than fifty mile northwest of here. The Englishman was a-headin' for the buffalo range to show the American boys how to kill 'em in style, and he had five thousand in cash on him and a lot of fancy grub in his wagon and him and his men were set afoot out there—their saddle stock and wagon taken a likin' to the stickup man and followed him off, and—but I ain't no hand to talk much.

When I get back to camp, Arkansaw has dug a good pit for turkey cookin' and Kansas has gone to the claybank where I sent him and fetched down plenty clay for mortar and Choctaw has gone to the thicket where I told him he'd find a nice young buck—good eatin' size. He's huntin' with a bow and war arrows that I taken off one of Peta Nocona's warriors who wouldn't need 'em no more. I hunt with that bow when gunfire ain't smart. Arkansaw and Kansas are gatherin' dry blackjack oak to make coals without much smoke, and they're laughin' and carryin' on like a brace of boys a-campin' out. I watch 'em for a minute, and I'm listenin' to 'em and I'm a-thinkin', company for Christmas ain't so bad at that.

Pretty soon Choctaw comes in with the buck over his shoulder, and I can see that the hunt has done him good 'cause that there temptation ain't a-workin' on him so hard now.

He looks at other men like they were men instead of marks to shoot at. So I send him up onto the bluff with my spyglass, and we take turns a-standin' guard up there until sundown with never a sight of a human: just buffalo, antelope, deer, mustangs, and such.

Meanwhile we're all busy as prairie dogs. I take the liver, heart, sweetbreads, and a slice of tenderloin from the buck and make us a larrupin' son-of-a-gun stew for supper, and Arkansaw he fixes a dried peach cobbler that's big enough for two meals, and Kansas goes to a pool downriver that I tell him about and comes back with a dozen big catfish for breakfast Christmas mornin', and Choctaw sees a cottontail and right away decides he wants a rabbit stew for eatin' sometime today—he ain't particular when—so he takes the bow and arrows again and comes back with six rabbits, and durned if I ain't makin' another stew before I know it. I reckon men on the dodge eat more than other men when they get a chance. With the law sniffin' and a-growlin' at your hocks, if you stop to eat you won't live to eat.

Watchin' me and Arkansaw a-mixin' this and that, Choctaw wants to know, "Where did you ever get all this fancy stuff away out here? White flour, long sweetening (sorghum), short sweetening (white sugar), canned milk, spices, onions, sweet potatoes, lard, and all kinds of dried fruit. Where did you ever get it?"

I looked at him. "Personal question, Choctaw, and nobody but a durned fool ever answers a personal question."

Choctaw allows he's plumb sorry and Arkansaw says he'd ought to be, and then everybody laughs fit to kill, and I'm thinkin', company for Christmas ain't a bad idea.

The big event of the day, as a fella says, comes when I put the turkeys down to cook. It's full dark and everybody is there, and I reckon nobody is thinkin' about gunfightin' and killin' and the law and hangin's and such, 'cause all we're talkin' about is this here turkey bake. We've got a big bed of redhot coals in the pit. I mix me a clay mortar and plaster the gobblers, feathers and all, about three inches thick with the sticky stuff and lay 'em down there on the coals; then we cover 'em with dirt and build a slow fire on top of 'em, and we stretch buffalo robes around it and green deerskin over it to hide the glow.

When we're finished, I tell the boys, "Them turks ought to be about right for eatin' by tomorrow, and that's Christmas."

Kansas is a-starin' into the fire sorta dreamylike, and he says, "A Christmas dinner with all the fixin's."

Regardless of the fact that we play four-handed Seven Up until midnight and don't sleep much after that, this fool Kansas rousts us out when it's comin' day on Christmas mornin'. Ain't he got a brain in his head, that kid. He swears he heard Santa Claus on the roof last night, and I tell him that all he heard was Old Henry Clay a-crunchin' a packrat's bones, and Choctaw declares I lit in the middle of the floor with a six-shooter when the first bone popped and I tell him he's a liar, but Arkansaw swears it's so and dad-blame me if they don't mighty nigh convince me that it *is*.

Then Choctaw says, "As I told you, I'll give you twenty dollars to show us that draw of yours."

I shake my head, pourin' him some coffee.

"I'll make it fifty, cash, if you'll do it slow."

"Go to hell," I tell Choctaw.

That old temptation must have been workin' on him in his sleep, and I'm thinkin', Christmas don't look none too promisin'.

But a wallop in breakfast of corn pone and fried catfish topped off with a middlin' big helpin' of leftover rabbit stew sorta smothers the temptation and Choctaw behaves right human for a while. He pitches in and helps Arkansaw and Kansas fry a stack of venison steaks to be warmed up in their gravy and go with the turkey, and I say I'll mix a bakin' of cush to go with both of 'em.

"What's cush?" asks Kansas.

"Cush? Ain't you never heard of cush? It's outlaw cake, and I was brung up on it."

So I take some stale white bread and crumble it and mix it with corn meal and soak 'em in hot water, then I put in hog fat—bear fat will do—and some raisins 'cause I got 'em, and salt and plenty pepper, and I cook my cush in a skillet until it's nice and brown and fit to go with any fat gobbler.

Meanwhile, the boys are so wrapped up in fixin' our Christmas dinner, nobody ain't offered to stand guard on the bluff, and I don't say anything about it. Damned careless, I know. But to tell the truth, I reckon all of us are burnt out on eternally standin' guard, asleep and awake, and we're mighty glad to sorta forget the law and The Hangin' Judge for one day at least. Now that I think of it—one of the best night's sleep I ever got, I got in jail. Next day I

busted out and didn't get no sleep for a week.

It ain't no ways time for dinner, but the boys keep a-wonderin' out loud whether them turks ain't burnt to a crisp and such talk—I'll swear they're like kids—until I can't put up with it no longer, so I tell Kansas and Choctaw to go and dig them gobblers up. There ain't a sign of a leak in their clay shells, which makes me right proud. When we crack 'em open, feathers and skin come away with the shell and there's our turk, plumb juicy like Nature made him. Nothin' gets away, not even the gobbler, and his meat is a-fallin' from his bones. I mighty nigh have to hold the boys off with a six-shooter.

We set the table inside right stylish and the boys' eyes pop out when I go to puttin' on a linen tablecloth and silver eatin' tools and English jams and jellies, but nobody asks me where I got the stuff.

Choctaw goes to his saddlebags and finds two quarts of champagne. He gives 'em to me, sayin', "I've been saving these for Christmas. They've taken up room that I really needed for ammunition."

Arkansaw has been diggin' in his towsack morral. Up he comes with a pint of Old Crow, and hands it over. "'Tain't much, but it'll give us a taste of Christmas cheer."

Kansas fetches somethin' from his warbag. He looks sheepish and he talks thataway, too. "Here's a jar of wild plum jelly. A week or so back a squatter's old lady gave it to me for my Christmas dinner wherever I happened to be. Said she lost her own boy this time last year. Killed in a gunfight at Pond Creek."

Liquor and Old Temptation work in double harness, and I'm afraid of what this team will do to Choctaw. I watch him close.

But he just sips a little champagne and stops at that and nobody else drinks much, which sets me thinkin' that if every man in the country was a gunsharp the anti-saloon preachers wouldn't have much to preach about. No gunfighter with a lick of sense will slow himself down by drinkin' when he's in fast company like this here Christmas gatherin' of mine.

I know we're a-celebratin' Christmas in a hole in the ground and the guns of the law may be linin' their sights on us for all we know, but we eat and talk and laugh and eat some more just like other folks do, and I betcha we're havin' more fun than they do 'cause we ain't had a chance to celebrate thisaway since we were boys,

maybe some of us never before. Kansas is havin' the time of his life. This sorrel-topped kid raises more Cain than any of us, and when it's gettin' dark and we build up a big fire in the chimney and shove the table out of the way and get our tobacco to goin' good, he starts to sing in that fine voice of his. Nobody talks then. Everybody listens—listens and thinks, I reckon.

Kansas sings about Christmas and happy folks who can show a light without fear of the law, and he sings of pretty things until my dingy old dugout commences to show spots of cheerful color, like bright curtains in place of a slab shutter on its window, and holly berries and mistletoe a-hangin' here and there, and a yellow tomcat a-sleepin' in front of the fire—his name was Slug—and over in the corner a little old cedar saplin' is all dressed up with red paper and cotton and red candles, and there's three pair of black stockin's a-hangin' on the tree, all of 'em darned a-plenty, and the longest stockin's are mine, and—

Hell! I'm a-seein' things that I thought I'd done forgot. I go and pour me some coffee. Choctaw holds out his cup. He's got a faraway look in his eye. I wonder, maybe he's a-seein' things, too.

Arkansaw is just a-settin' there on his bunk. He's watchin' Kansas and a-listenin' with his eyes half shut part of the time, and he ain't a-talkin'. In the light from the fire and the oil lamp his face looks more than ever like a sandstone rock that's weathered and chipped, and I'm wonderin' what serious thing he's got on his mind. So I ask him if he can't spin us a yarn that will make good listenin' on Christmas night.

Arkansaw grins, mostly with his eyes, and says, "Yes, boys, I reckon I've got a story I can tell." He looks at his watch. "It's gettin' along. My story is a Christmas story, so I'd better get goin' on it 'cause Christmas will soon be over."

We settle down to listen—Choctaw tilted back on a stool in the corner by the fireplace, Kansas on his bunk straight across the room, and me on my bunk same side as Arkansaw.

"If this should happen to be my last Christmas, boys, I want you all to know that it's the best I ever had." That's the way Arkansaw started out. "And it has set me to thinkin' hard about a boy who never had a Christmas. I'll call him Bud for short. Early on the mornin' of the first Christmas that Bud can remember good, a noise woke him up, and he figured it was Santa Claus a-climbin' down the cabin chimney. It was Comanches. They killed his maw and paw and carried Bud off."

Arkansaw keeps still for a minute, a-drawin' on a cold pipe like he sorta hates to go on with his story. Pretty soon he does, though.

"Bud missed five Christmases while the Indians had him. Then the Rangers got him away from the Comanches and an old bachelor down in Texas adopted the boy. This ornery old skinflint didn't believe in Christmas any more than the Indians did. All he believed in was makin' money and hangin' onto it, and he worked Bud from mornin' to night, winter and summer. The boy would hear other kids carryin' on about Christmas and sometimes he'd catch sight of a Christmas tree through a window or in somebody's yard, but he never had a Christmas of his own. That went on until he was comin' fourteen. Then the day before Christmas he took the old man's rifle and six-shooters and lifted a horse and lit out. Of course they had the law on his trail that very day. Bud celebrated *that* Christmas a-straddle of his pony, cold and hungry and a-ridin' hard."

Arkansaw stops for a long breath, then he says, "The posse cornered Bud on the Brazos. He fit 'em like a wildcat and got clean away. Nobody was killed, but he did wing a few of the lawmen and that made the boy an outlaw with a bounty on his scalp."

Arkansaw stops to load his pipe. Kansas is settin' back against the wall with his arms folded and his long legs crossed, a-takin' in every word. Choctaw sits up on his stool soon as ever talk about gunfightin' and shootin' lawmen commences. Me—I'm a-thinkin' about a heap of things that happened when I was a boy.

"From there on it's the old story," says Arkansaw when his pipe is goin' good. "The law hounded Bud from pillar to post, tacked crimes onto him that he never committed, and before long folks were callin' him the Boy Bandit and the Daring Desperado and such foolishness until there came a time when he had to shoot or bluff his way out of any town he stopped in. His gunplay had made a reputation big enough to stir up the jealousy of badmen who could not stand for anybody to be faster with a six-shooter than they were, and they went a-lookin' for Bud. He downed several of 'em in fair fights."

I can see that his line of talk ain't doin' Choctaw a particle of good. It's playin' right into the hand of Old Temptation. The breed is a-settin' there like he's fixed to dive for cover or slap leather any second, and I ain't never seen hotter eyes in a meaner face than his'n. I'm wishin' to hell that I hadn't asked Arkansaw for a story.

"In all those years Bud never had a chance to celebrate a peaceable Christmas," he's sayin', "'cause the law and gunsharps keep him on the move. In a shootin' scrape some time back he saved the life of a young fool who had no business to be where he was, and Bud had taken this Young Wild West home to his dad, then rode off in a mile-high cloud of dust before the old man hardly had a chance to thank him. This old jasper is rich, and he thinks a heap of his boy. When he finally got the whole story out of the kid, he hired detectives to learn all they could about Bud's history, and to find him. They got the history all right, but they never got Bud. The old man never gave up, though. He swears he'll find Bud and fight his case through all the courts in the country if need be to clear him. This old cattle king fired the detectives and hired a deputy United States marshal who was on leave and told him to go find Bud, if the outlaw was still above ground, no matter how long the trail or where it took him."

Arkansaw looks at his watch, puts it back in his pocket slow and careful-like. "Doggoned if it ain't two minutes after midnight and Christmas is over."

Then he grins, and says, "Well, Bud, you've had your Christmas at last."

He's lookin' straight at Kansas!

Kansas disappears behind a cloud of smoke. So does Choctaw. Arkansaw's smoke slaps me in the face. Dishes rattle and the log roof bounces and the lamps goes out. Arkansaw jerks back. Choctaw is slammed against the wall, then he topples onto the stool and hangs there like a dead wolf.

I grab a-holt of Arkansaw. So does Kansas.

With a hand inside his shirt, the deputy grins, and whispers, "Ain't hurt bad. He peeled a rib for me, that's all. Fast work, boys, mighty fast. Much obliged."

I blow the smoke from my gun and put it away.

And I'm thinkin', company for Christmas is a powerful fine idea.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Fans of British village mysteries should be delighted with **Death in a Strange Country** by Donna Leon (HarperCollins, \$20). Never mind that her protagonist, Guido Brunetti, is a commissario of the Venice police; this book reads like a well-crafted English mystery. For starters, Leon has endowed Brunetti with doggedness, compassion, and intimate knowledge of his territory, qualities that make his British counterparts so formidable as crime-solvers. The murder of an American from the huge naval base nearby poses several challenges, including stonewalling by both the Americans and Guido's own superior. As we follow Guido through the investigation, we are treated to a view of Italian politics and details of Venetian life that is almost as fascinating as Leon's twisty plot. Donna Leon is a writer to watch.

J. Callahan Garrity returns in Kathy Hogan Trocheck's second novel, **To Live and Die in Dixie** (HarperCollins, \$20). Callahan, a former cop, now runs House Mouse, a cleaning service in Atlanta. She's moved back home and shares the ramshackle house where she grew up with her eccentric mom and business partner, Edna. Domestic cleaning shouldn't be dangerous, reasons Callahan. And to be fair, the young lady is already quite dead in an upstairs bedroom of the Littlefield mansion they've been hired to spruce up by the time House Mouse arrives on the scene. Littlefield, who was accused and acquitted of murdering a young woman twenty years before, seems more concerned about a missing Civil War diary than the déjà vu circumstances of a homicide in his house. He actually hires Callahan just to find his stolen property; it is she

who believes that the diary is with the murderer. Trocheck has created a fresh and credible protagonist, surrounded her with a colorfully quirky set of companions, and set her on a case with more than one twist around the bend. *To Live and Die in Dixie* is compulsive reading.

Summer Cool by Al Sarrantonio is relentlessly tough, yet rendered in touchingly spare prose. And it has an intriguing premise. It seems that Bob Petty has walked away from the wife and kids he adores, walked away without any explanation and a promise never to return. Thus is the peace of private eye Jack Paine's vacation broken by a call from his best friend's wife Terry. Jack is as puzzled as Bob's wife. It's so out of character, so inexplicable. And yet Bob Petty is quite serious about not being found again, serious enough to do serious damage to his former good friend Jack when he gets too close to his heels. (Walker, \$19.95)

When love twists into hate, it can hide anywhere, even beneath the calm surface of lovely Martha's Vineyard. That's where former cop J. W. Jackson now lives, earning his living by fishing and occasionally taking on a P. I. case. But the Vineyard has lost some of its magic for J. W. in Philip R. Craig's **Cliff Hanger**. His lover Zee has fled to an outstate conference and is threatening to leave the island to enter medical school. Then the young niece of an island friend is tracked down and savagely attacked by her former lover. And there are also the "accidents" that begin plaguing J. W. He'll have to leave his beloved island to find the truth, even going so far as to get on horseback in Colorado to meet a killer across a deep gulch. If you haven't discovered this Martha's Vineyard series, do so. The island magic, the congenial company, the great food, the dash of romance—this entire series is an armchair vacation. (Scribners, \$20)

A big, ambitious novel with breathtaking scenery and a stunning secret at its heart is Peter Hoeg's Danish thriller, **Smilla's Sense of Snow** (Farrar Straus and Giroux, \$22). Smilla Qaavigaaq Jaspersen is the daughter of an Eskimo mother and a Danish father. Born in Greenland, brilliant, educated in the sciences (with a specialty in ice and its properties), she now lives quite alone in Copenhagen, only letting into her life the small Eskimo boy who lives in the flat downstairs. Smilla can read his footsteps in the snow on the roof: they tell her that Isaiah didn't accidentally fall to his death. He was pursued. Thus begins Smilla's search for the truth, and the opening of an adventure vast in its scope, unlike any other I've read. Smilla has stumbled into a web of conspiracy,

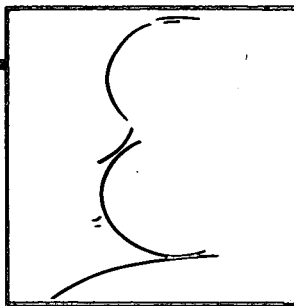
and she will need to draw on all her strength to survive. Hoeg moves from hair-raising action scenes to lyrical passages of pure science and mathematics. Smilla, too, is exquisitely drawn, a sophisticated portrait of a woman in her late thirties whose genes and upbringing have always made her her own worst enemy. There is no sentiment to dull Hoeg's diamond-sharp picture of Greenland, its Eskimo population, and Denmark's politics there. There is only Smilla, whose search for the truth burns hot and bright.

Lisa Scottoline's narrator is Mary Di Nunzio, a wisecracking attorney who's been climbing her way to the top of her top-notch law firm in Philadelphia for eight long years. Her take on things is what makes **Everywhere That Mary Went** (Harper, \$4.99) worth your while. After all, it's not surprising that Mary initially ignores the crank phone calls she's been getting, even though they seem to worry her secretary Brent. She puts in grueling hours, and she's still recovering emotionally from the death of her fiancé the year before. Who's got time to worry about a crank? But when the incidents escalate to murder, Mary proves herself to be one tough lady, full of quips, self-honesty, and a firm grasp of the law. I look forward to her next case.

If you haven't picked up one of Dana Stabenow's paperback originals, you're missing out on some unusual mystery fare by an Edgar-winning newcomer. Protagonist Kate Shugak is an Aleut, a former prosecutor with the Anchorage D.A.'s office, who's returned to her roots, supporting herself as a P.I. The book opens on a storm-tossed fishing boat on the freezing Bering Sea, where Kate has gone undercover (and as the only woman on board) to learn the fate of two young crew members who disappeared last time out. Stabenow has created an independent, tough-minded sleuth whose Aleutian background adds an exotic character to these private eye tales. **Dead in the Water** (Berkley, \$3.99) is the third book in the series, the final one to be published as a paperback original, but you'll still have *A Cold Day for Murder* (Berkley, \$3.99) and *A Fatal Thaw* (Berkley, \$3.99) to take you back to Alaska before her fourth book comes out in hardcover next spring.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



The Good Son is a thriller starring two of today's top kid actors, but it is in no way a film for children. Endangering a young child or two, as this movie does, is a surefire way of tightening the old heartstrings—at least for this father of a two-year-old—but both Macaulay Culkin and Elijah Wood are first-rate as cousins thrown together after the death of Wood's mother.

Wood is Mark Evans, the boy who suffers that loss. A short time later, his father finds himself faced with a two-week business trip that will “set him up for life.” Young, vulnerable Mark is about to be shipped off to relatives for safekeeping.

The real kicker comes when Mark's Uncle Jack tells the boy's reluctant dad, “It'll do him good to spend some time with other kids.” If you've seen the television ads for this film

or heard anything about it, you know better.

Pint-sized Hollywood heavyweight Macaulay Culkin is Henry, the child whom Mark will be spending much of his time with.

Mark leaves his New Mexico home to stay with his Aunt Susan (Wendy Crewson), Uncle Jack (David Morse), and two young cousins in a picture-perfect snowy New England town. There Mark and Henry rapidly become inseparable. They share a bedroom, talking late into the cold New England night. They pal around during the day doing boy stuff—running around, scaling trees, tossing a football.

But when Henry threatens to find out whether Mark can fly while dangling him from what seems to be the highest treehouse ever constructed, it's time to raise an eyebrow.

Still, when Mark succeeds in

getting up to the treehouse, the two boys get into a little normal roughhousing and laugh it off.

Something sinister is afoot, however, as Henry gradually reveals a dark side. But Mark is the only person privy to the secret world of his increasingly diabolical cousin.

Henry likes to pull what he calls pranks. When his pranks escalate to killing dogs and nearly drowning his cute little sister (Culkin's real-life sister Quinn Culkin), Mark, like any normal person, begins to worry.

Ever so gradually Henry turns from Norman Rockwell to Norman Bates. As the pace and seriousness of Henry's "pranks" pick up, he practically dares his increasingly fearful cousin to tell on him. He's a master at manipulation, able to make his parents believe that Mark is still crazy with grief over his mother's death and is behaving very strangely. He even gets to the local therapist Mark has been seeing.

The real strain on this story's credibility is that Henry's parents are totally oblivious to their son's psychotic behavior. It's explained that they are still suffering from the accidental death of their baby son Richard.

But I like to think that if my son were assembling a lethal weapon out in the garage I'd re-

alize something was amiss and look into it. When Henry's mom does eventually make her way into the shed, she finds herself face to face with a doll her son has hung from a noose.

The heart-stopping climax of *The Good Son* takes place on a porch high atop the rocky Atlantic surf. And thankfully, when it's finished, it really is finished. It avoids the cheap trick so many other thrillers use—*Dead Calm* and *Misery*, to name a couple—in furnishing a false ending for an extra thrill. This finish is frightening without resorting to such things. What's more, it's memorable.

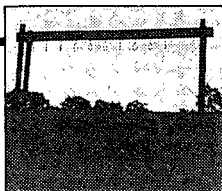
Macaulay Culkin has become so identified as the *Home Alone* kid that many questioned his ability to pull off the evil turn required for this film. He has done a good job and has shown he can do more than just slap his cheeks, open wide, and scream.

Elijah Wood displays an innocence one likes to see in a child. And is adept at becoming agitated, which he does more and more frequently as the story unfolds.

Director Joseph Ruben, who directed *Sleeping with the Enemy*, keeps the tension building at a steady pace throughout. He also leaves no loose ends, which is important in a neat thriller like this.

THE STORY THAT WON

The September Mysterious by Robert V. Kesling of Ann mentions go to Julie DeGroat Hemstrom of Montrose, Colorado, Oregon; Lorraine S. York; Robert L. Mushen of San Kloszewski of Woodside, New York; Betty Thomason of Winters, Texas; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; and Lisa J. Aldrich of Elmwood, Massachusetts.



Photograph contest was won Arbor, Michigan. Honorable of Theresa, New York; Greta rado; Alice Storaasli of North Sprung of Brooklyn, New Richland, Washington; Susan Kloszewski of Woodside, New York; Betty Thomason of Winters, Texas; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; and Lisa J. Aldrich of Elmwood, Massachusetts.

Photo by Charles F. Walker

THE MESSAGE by Robert V. Kesling

Deputy Jones pointed. "Look! Over in the park. Some vandal wrecked the monkey rings—twisted some outa line, even tore two off. Not a nice thing to do the day after Christmas."

Old Sheriff Taylor agreed. "Nope, 'twarn't."

"Anyhow," continued Jones, "I reckon we're lucky it wasn't the Black Devil gang. They hit Cedarville just after Halloween. Motorcycles suddenly roared in from all directions—musta been a hundred. Terrified everybody, sacked the village, and rode off with all the loot they could tote."

"So I heerd."

"Then, just after Thanksgiving, they did the same thing to Birchburg. State police still can't figger how they all know where an' when to strike. No big gatherin' spotted by helicopters beforehand, no communications picked up on the radio scanner. It's scary."

"Ee-yep."

"Think they'll attack here in Ash Center?"

For answer, the old sheriff declared, "The vandal didn' rip down alla them rings. Notice, he left one twisted, two straight, three twisted, one straight, two twisted, one straight, and two missin'."

"Probably in a hurry," suggested Jones. "Didn' have time to finish his dirty work."

"One—two—three—one—two—one—nothin'—nothin'. Thet's their message!"

"I don't get it," said the deputy.

"Twelve thirty-one, twenty-one hundred. Thet's when they'll come."

"You mean—"

"Ee-yep. Last day of December at twenty-one hundred hours they plan to roar in here. So, we got five days to set up a New Year's Eve surprise fer them Black Devils—one they won't fergit."

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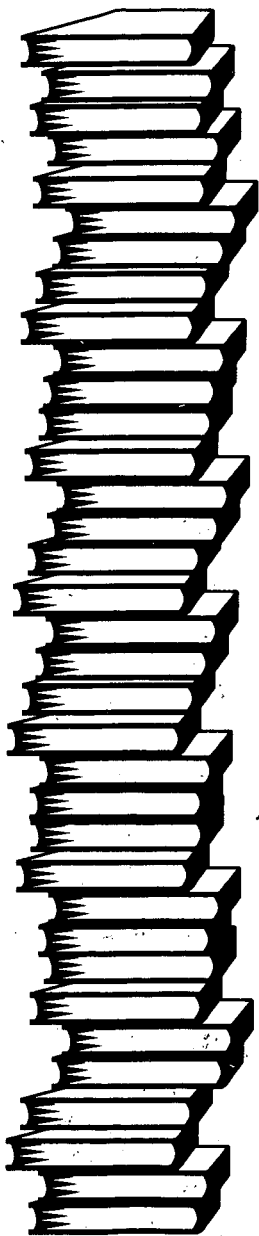
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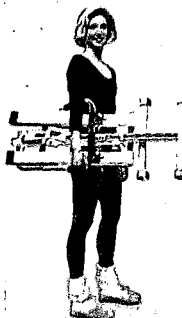
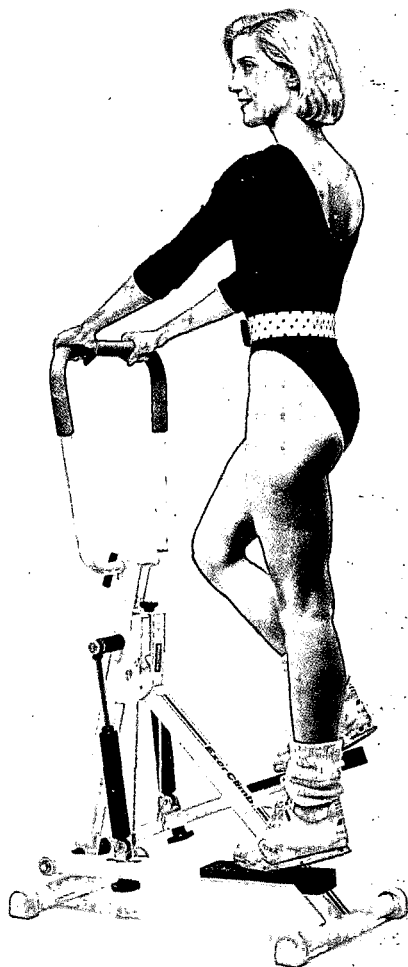
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